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George Arthur Scott T H E S S

The Shaking of the Sons of Believers

VOLUME TWO

Thomas Cook

A study of some of the informal religious  
tendencies in primitive and

Robert Clarence Piske

The community-religious relationship of  
orthodox aviation following World



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THEOLOGICAL BASES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

BY

EMIL BRUNNER

CONTENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

George Arthur Casaday

The theological backgrounds of Christian  
ethics in Emil Brunner

Thomas Cook

A study of some of the universal religious  
tendencies in primitive man

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The community-church relationship at  
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Submitted to the  
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THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS  
IN EMIL BRUNNER

by

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## INTRODUCTION

In every historical period of crisis or transition, the question of conduct becomes acute. Old standards are inadequate. Faith in old norms is shaken. The question, "What shall I do?" becomes poignant and pressing. It is not unexpected therefore that the question of ethics is coming rapidly to the foreground of Christian thought. When to this is added the questioning raised by New Testament criticism as to the teachings of Jesus, which formed the basis of much of our ethical thought, we can easily see why there is a need to re-think Christian ethics and discover, if possible, an answer to the question of right conduct in our baffling age.

The most thorough and searching analysis of this problem by any Protestant thinker of our era has been presented recently by Emil Brunner, the Swiss theologian, formerly professor of theology in Zurich, and now lecturing at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Professor Brunner vehemently repudiates any philosophical basis for ethics, asserting that philosophical systems are self-contradictory, because sinful man is made the point of reference instead of God. Ethics, which is defined as the philosophy of the good, must rest upon the nature of God and the nature of man and upon their relationship to one another. Any system of thought which attempts to discover the good with man as the point of reference is doomed to failure, for man is a sinner. Only God is good. Therefore



the good to which man should give obedience is the will of God. Ethics is thereby made a theological problem. Christians therefore cannot say, "Let us forget our theological differences and work together for the good," for the theological conceptions determine what the good is. Obedience to the will of God is the only sure foundation of conduct--the only absolute. Accordingly when Emil Brunner produced his massive book on Christian ethics, The Divine Imperative, he made the concept of the Divine Command the center and ground of his thought and the theological basis of ethics.

Before considering Professor Brunner's theological beliefs which he claims are the ground of his ethics, we shall perhaps profit by a brief survey of his theological background. Brunner is identified with the movement in theology called by various names: Barthian Theology, Dialectic Theology, and the Theology of Crisis. This movement started in the years following the World War in Switzerland. Its leaders were three young pastors who held adjacent parishes: Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Eduard Thurneysen. In their fellowship together they faced the problem of the post-war crisis and the need of an ultimate message for their people. The movement resulted from what Brunner called "a great discovery of the real meaning of the Word of God," and is a healthy reaction against the too facile optimism of the 19th century. The claim of these theologians is that they are putting forth anew the essential Christian teaching as propounded by the Reformers. Oscar Hardman says, "The theology of crisis is essentially a return to the theology of the reformers and a vigorous re-affirmation of its fundamental propositions, combined



with an uncompromising rejection of the transformations effected by the philosophy, theology, and science of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a rejection also of the unreformed ethical system which was imported into Reformation thought and practice as early as Melanchthon.<sup>1</sup> In general we can say that Barthian thought is based upon the Bible as understood in the light of Paul, and as interpreted by the Reformers. It takes Luther's emphasis upon justification by faith, and Calvin's emphasis upon the sovereignty of God. This re-interpretation of the Reformers is in turn conditioned by the thought of the Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, who first declared the "wholly-otherness" of God and re-emphasized the utter sinfulness of man and the futility of a "social gospel." Also as an important conditioning factor is the thought of the Russian novelist, Dostoevsky, and his vivid presentations of "the tragic sense of life." All these factors must be considered in addition to the present critical and almost hopeless situation in Europe, and in light of the understanding of the movement as a reaction against identifying the Kingdom of God with social movements, or with the church, or with evolutionary progress.

While the influence of Luther is more pronounced than that of Calvin, we must recognize that the Barthians are not defending Lutheranism as it is today, corrupted by many factors. Brunner, Gogarten, and Karl Holl all maintain that even Troeltsch has misinterpreted Luther. Luther, they claim, did have a social ethic in

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Hardman, "Review of The Divine Imperative," Journal of Theological Studies, Vol. 38, p. 442.



the Law of Love. Dr. Werner Betcke concurs in this judgment, pointing out that Luther taught that it is impossible to separate faith from love, and quotes Luther's saying: "where faith is there neighborly love is active, and where this love is lacking faith is nonexistent."<sup>1</sup> Brunner therefore claims that Luther did have a social ethic, and upon the same basis as Luther, he seeks to establish a theological basis for a modern Christian ethic.

Some of the more prominent trends against which the Barthians react are: (1) The blending of the divine and human spirit, which is characteristic of both mystical and humanistic theology. (2) The blending of the divine and human kingdom, which is characteristic of both Catholicism and the "late" social gospel. (3) The blending of the divine and human ethics. Thus all mysticism, all naturalistic empiricism, all metaphysical speculation are repudiated as valid ways of knowing God. God's Word is external to us, and beyond man's ways of finding out.

The paradoxical statements of Biblical theology are emphasized, often unduly so. This use of paradox makes most Barthian literature difficult and confusing in comparison to the more direct thought of the Westerner. This is doubly true because, as Paul Tillich has pointed out, Barth has attempted to establish the paradox by means of supernaturalism rather than by dialectics.<sup>2</sup> In the Barthian thought there is no synthesis. There is only the "impossible" for man, and

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Betcke, "Comments," Expository Times, Vol. 46, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, "What is Wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology," Journal of Religion, Vol. 15, pp. 127-145.



the "possible" for God, without the reality. In seeking to protect the sovereign dignity and "otherness" of God, Barth has made such a radical discontinuity between God and man that the paradox is largely impossible of solution. In order to avoid the confusion between man's possibilities and God's possibilities, he has limited God's action to specific events which are incursions into spatial procedures, as the life of Jesus Christ, the Bible, and sacraments. These are not themselves the divine event when regarded as human historical procedures, but become so through God's act. Just how this happens, is, as Dorothy Emmet points out, "a vast obscurity."

Dialectic thinking, says Tillich, maintains also that what is a purely divine possibility may not be interpreted as a human possibility.

But dialectic thinking maintains that the question about the divine possibility is a human possibility. And, further, it maintains that no question could be asked about the divine possibility unless a divine answer, even if preliminary and scarcely intelligible, were not always already available. For in order to be able to ask about God, man must already have experienced God as the goal of a possible question. Thus the human possibility of the question is no longer purely a human possibility, since it already contains answers.<sup>1</sup>

Thus there is no absolute discontinuity between man and God. The human possibility is more than human, since it already contains somewhat of the divine possibility. Thus history is not purely God-abandoned, nor is it simply God's revelation. In it, says Tillich, there came a "fullness of time" when history was ripe for the event "which does not originate from history and also is not injected into it as a foreign substance, but breaks out within it and is capable of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.



being received in history."<sup>1</sup> It follows from this that history of religions while not to be identified with revelation nevertheless in some measure reveals God, else the ultimate revelation would have been unintelligible. In relation to man this means that God is already within us to some degree, else we could not answer the revelation in Jesus Christ.

The point of all this is that Brunner has broken with Barth on this very question of revelation, and holds with Tillich that there is a dialectical relation between a general and the specific revelation. It is doubtful that without this break he could have written either his book, Man and God, or The Divine Imperative.

Returning now to the center of interest in this paper, we recall that Brunner, recognizing the inability of philosophy to provide an absolute ethic, holds that the only adequate foundation for right conduct is the will of God, for that alone is good. Our first question, then, is, "How does man perceive or discover or come to know the will of God?"

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER I

### THE APPREHENSION OF THE WILL OF GOD

Although Brunner broke with Barth in maintaining the presence of a general revelation, he apparently does not consider it in any way sufficient as a basis of knowledge as to the will of God. Even though God's image is in man and not totally destroyed by sin, yet it is so obscured that in man there is no inherent capacity for apprehending the will of God. Brunner denies that the will of God is discoverable by man in history, in nature, through conscience, or through mystical contemplation. There is no point of identity between divine and human knowledge in reason. "God does not make His sovereign rights over man felt as a blind natural force."<sup>1</sup> The Good, i.e., the will of God, is apprehended solely through revelation and is religious rather than moral.

Whereas most Christian writers on the subject of ethics try to combine philosophic knowledge and revelation, Brunner claims to break away from philosophic ethics and to place this thought squarely upon specific Christian revelation. Here he follows the Reformers in pointing out that the findings of philosophy cannot be synthesized with revealed truth, for, in the last analysis, all philosophies make God and man one, while the Christian faith maintains that God is other

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative, translated by Olive Wyon, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), p. 54.



than man. Brunner oversimplifies rationalistic ethics and places them all in one of two categories--idealistic legalism or realistic eudaemonism. Both of these, he claims, trust man himself to achieve the good and both result in self-centeredness and self-righteousness. Only the Christian ethic releases us from ourselves and makes us truly free agents.

The empirical approach of many American theologians would likewise be repudiated by Brunner. The statement that "the aim of the ethical life is to find the system of interacting forces that will best serve human need, and to this end we must find all the connectedness possible"<sup>1</sup> would be very acceptable to many Americans. But such naturalism and dependence upon human capacity for finding the basis of the ethical life is anathema to Brunner. No, the will of God is not to be found by men either by idealistic speculation or by empirical naturalism.

Brunner regards Kant's position very highly, but criticizes it also as inadequate. He points out that the will of God is not to be discovered through the apprehension of an immanent moral law. If there were such a thing, maintains Brunner, then we would have a universal ethical standard accepted now, whereas actually we have a great variety of standards.<sup>2</sup> Brunner does recognize the existence of the

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<sup>1</sup>G. K. Robinson, "Ethics, Cosmology, and Religious Faith," Journal of Religion, January, 1936, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>On the other hand, Prof. O. C. Quick in his article, "Christian Theology and Moral Principles" (Expository Times, Vol. 48), points out that when we survey the whole moral field we find the amount of unanimity more striking than the diversity. When external and cultural factors, which undoubtedly condition insight, are taken into account, it appears that there is considerable likeness in moral judgment.



"categorical imperative," but points out that this sense of oughtness can only describe the form of the good will and cannot say what should be done. There may be that in man which tells him he ought to do right, but it cannot give content as to what the right is. If God was immanent or if there was a point of identity in reason between God and man, then it would be possible for philosophy to discover the will of God, or for science to discover it, or even for the individual to discover God's will through mystical experience in the depths of his own soul. The question arises as to whether Kant's transcendental reference might not bring his philosophical and theological ethic together. Kant himself frankly placed his philosophic ethic alongside the Christian ethic as being the same, thus indicating the possibility of man's discovering God's will. But Brunner repudiates this, pointing out that God is a personal "Thou" who stands over against the "I", and such a God cannot be identified with a transcendental moral law.

Brunner recognizes a high value in the Kantian ethic in that it does not say in detail just what we ought to do. It lays down no rules and regulations for specific conduct beforehand, and regards the will simply as formally determined by law, not as given specific content. Brunner approvingly says,

Here, at any rate, there is no trace of the much decried "legalism" of the Kantian ethic. For this formalism, if literally carried out, would mean that the "good" element in conduct could never be perceived beforehand; obedience to the moral law at any given time is alone good. But this truth could only be maintained if we could go further, and say: the only good is obedience to God's command as it is manifested to us in changing circumstances. There is no trace of this in Kant, however. On the contrary, the same formalism which points in this direction requires also the possibility of determining beforehand all the possible ethical content.



For, as we know, it is only the transcendental conception of law and not the theological conception of command which is legitimate in the Kantian ethic. Law, however, in contrast to command, is that which is not intended for any particular time, it is non-individual, it is timeless and universal.<sup>1</sup>

Kant therefore believes in the possibility of constructing timeless valid norms of duty for actual conduct. But law and norms which are universal and impersonal cannot be the will of a personal living God.

Therefore Brunner repudiates both the idea of an immanent and of a transcendent moral law as the basis of knowledge or the source of man's apprehension of the will of God. Neither guidance through conscience by an immanent moral law, nor detailed guidance deduced from a system of transcendent principles predetermining action in concrete situations can be regarded as the will of God. The reality of an immanent moral law is denied, and an ethic of the second type is certain to be legalistic and incompatible with the Christian conception of God's will as personal and as an expression of love in every unique situation.

It is in this that the Roman Catholic ethical system is also denounced. Brunner points out that

"In accordance with its juridically defined conception of faith and of the Church its conception of the Good is also rigidly legalistic, and therefore its ethical system is fundamentally a system of casuistry. The lesser stipulations are logically derived from the universal law, and by means of a closely woven network of further minor regulations the whole realm of human life is legally defined, so that for every case, in actual practice, it is possible to look up the ethical code and find out what is commanded and what is forbidden."<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the Good conceived legalistically, but it is also conceived naturalistically. "The Good is 'all that brings man's nature

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<sup>1</sup>Emil Brunner, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 91



to perfection. The idea of the Good thus precedes the knowledge of God and is presupposed by it."<sup>1</sup> Because of the Catholic conception of natural law, it is consistent to hold that natural man can perceive and do good. Both this legalism and this naturalism are inconsistent, maintains Brunner, with the doctrine of justification by faith.

Likewise Brunner denounces the legalism of Pharisaism. He admits that Law is of God and was the only possible way for man in his sinful state to have a relationship with God. From the point of view of the natural understanding of morality, the Good regarded as Law represents its highest stage and its nearest approach to truth. Yet it also is farthest away. "Moralistic legalism--Pharisaism of every kind, constitutes on the one hand the place of greatest nearness of God; and on the other the place of greatest distance from God."<sup>2</sup> Inasmuch as this view of the Good is serious, and considers the Good as a command, "Thou shalt," it is near the truth. But on the other hand, the Good is to be achieved by man--a "righteousness of works"; and the view which holds that the Good is the life given by God is completely absent. Thus the Will of God divorced from a personal relationship with God becomes "an abstraction, hovering above life in its concreteness as a schematic timeless entity."<sup>3</sup> This rigid legalism destroys life and freedom. Therefore the Old Testament Law is not to be regarded as a system of principles by which action can be predetermined for every concrete situation. The decalogue, like the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



teachings of Jesus given in the Sermon on the Mount, is not to be considered as regulation of human life by specific precept. Brunner says they are "God-given paradigms of love, in which God wills that we should learn to practise what we have learned of the commandment to love." This is clarified further in the statement that "here and there a plunge is made into human life and something is 'lifted-out' in order to make the meaning of love clearer. But the matter which has been singled out is not held fast as such; it is allowed to slip back again."<sup>1</sup> The will of God is not to be apprehended in codes of law or general principles, even when these are considered as God-given.

This is true not only of the Sermon on the Mount and the Old Testament Law, but applies to all the teachings of Jesus. Neither the historical life, nor the ethical teachings of Jesus are to be regarded as a norm or a law applicable to all life's situations. The actual historical life and the teachings of Jesus are not revelations of God's will, but indications or sign-posts towards the revelation. Most Christians who have discussed ethics have built up a Christian morality based upon the example of the human life of Jesus, and upon his teachings. They would agree with Herbert H. Henson that Christian morality is that which is expressed in the sayings and life of Jesus, in the teachings of his followers, and in the distinctive character of the civilization of Christendom.<sup>2</sup> "What would Jesus do?" has been the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 135-136.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. H. Henson, Christian Morality: Natural, Developing, Final, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).



criterion of action of many Christians. His teachings, when correctly understood, have been regarded as applicable to all situations. His historical person has been regarded as the ideal for Christians. This has been an ethic which has had to meet two serious difficulties. First, New Testament criticism has brought forth so many doubts as to the actual teachings and actions of Jesus, that there is considerable uncertainty as to what can be taken as factual and what is appended. Second, the ethical teachings of Jesus seem impossible for many situations, particularly in regard to a man's action in his official capacity in a sinful world. Brunner avoids both of these difficulties by basing his ethics on something other than the teachings and life-example of Jesus. He accepts the Johannine conception that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life," and that "no man cometh to the Father" except by Him. Yet he does not mean that the historical way in which Jesus lived or the historical teachings which he spoke provide principles by which we can come to God. All attempts to base our Christian ethics upon a critical evaluation of the ethical teachings of Jesus and an application of the principles contained therein to our modern world are futile. Brunner goes so far as to say in this connection that "Jesus of Nazareth, the Rabbi, the so-called historical Jesus was an object of no interest for the early Christians, and is of no interest today for those who have preserved some understanding of what Christian faith means. . . . The historic Jesus is a corpse, a scientific abstraction which is of no value to us."<sup>1</sup> No,

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, The Word and the World, (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1931), p. 88.



ethics cannot be founded upon the attempt at a historical understanding of Jesus. In logical agreement with Lutheranism, Brunner maintains that only those who have faith can know the Christ who came in the flesh. Faith--not historical criticism--enables us to know the historical reality of Jesus. Only the believer can see "Christ in the flesh," the historian can only see "Christ after the flesh," i.e., in the way of natural man, with all its uncertainties.<sup>1</sup> The "accidental" historical elements in the life of Jesus preserved for us in the Bible do not constitute revelation, but merely witness to the fact that the historical reality of the incarnation took place. The Word which his Life contained, the Person veiled in his flesh, is the revelation. The problem of Christian ethics is theological rather than historical. This provides an escape from the confusion in regard to the historical figure of Jesus. Although H. J. Cadbury in his penetrating, if one-sided, criticism, does not want Christians to return to a merely theological conception of Jesus, he doesn't leave much ground for a historical basis of ethics. He points out that with all our historical research Jesus remains largely unknown and unexplained, and remarks, "Let us recall the words of the inscrutable Jesus himself, 'No one knows the Son, save the Father.' He promises no further exception."<sup>2</sup> This seems to support Brunner's thesis, and in spite of Cadbury's protest practically forces us into a theological interpretation. If

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, The Mediator, Translated by Olive Wyon, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1934), p. 346. A certain danger appears here which opens the way to Biblicism. From this point of view the believer can believe almost anything that makes a vivid appeal to him in the Bible as a revelation, and ignore other things, without being cognizant of critical uncertainties.

<sup>2</sup> H. J. Cadbury, The Peril of Modernizing Jesus, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), p. 48.



Jesus was so completely a child of his time, as Cadbury insists, that his general horizons and assumptions, the methods of his thought, and the furniture of his mind were products of his time and place, then in his historical figure he could not have been the bearer of a revelation of the will of the transcendent God. Cadbury admits with Brunner that faith is necessary to the understanding of Jesus. He quotes G. Kittel on this point: "The Jesus of history is valueless and unintelligible unless he be experienced and confessed by faith as the living Christ."<sup>1</sup> Brunner therefore has not only the support on this issue of such a European New Testament scholar as Rudolf Bultmann, who is regarded as a Barthian, but also of an American New Testament scholar, who is not a Barthian.

The danger that besets this position has been pointed out by Professor John C. Bennett. He says:

This tendency may be carried so far that the revelation of God through Christ seems to be in spite of rather than through the concrete human personality of the historical Jesus. . . . . Whatever our Christological theory may be it is most dangerous to cut it loose from the content of the personality and teachings of Jesus. It is not enough to keep it tied to the formal facts of his life, death, and resurrection. The significance of those formal facts depends upon the kind of person Jesus was as a concrete individual. In the Jesus of history we find the content of the revelation of God which is essential to Christianity. In him we find the norm by which to test every supposed experience of the "contemporary Christ." How do we know that God was in Christ if we do not discover it to be true from the exceptional quality of the personality of Jesus and the tested truth of his teachings?"<sup>2</sup>

Brunner would partially accept this warning, yet not wholly, for it is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 192. Cf., G. Kittel, Mysterium Christi, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Bennett, Social Salvation, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), pp. 92,94.



through faith, he maintains, not through recognition of the exceptional quality of Jesus' personality, nor the validity of his teachings, that we accept him. Brunner will not allow man this dignity nor this ability to discern or judge what is the revelation of God. God not only gives the revelation, but he apparently gives the apprehension of it by giving faith. Just how this happens is another obscurity.

Summarizing Brunner's thought on this subject of the apprehension of the will of God, we can say that man cannot apprehend the will of God through any potentialities or capacities inherent in himself. Neither religious feeling, nor intuition can gain for him knowledge of God's will. Mystical experience and speculative rationalism are likewise futile. Empiricism and pragmatism are not considered as adequate. No! Man does not apprehend the good, i.e. the will of God, but man is apprehended by it. Man does not discern nor judge the good, but the good judges him. God's will is revealed to man. But this revelation is not simply through immanent nor transcendent moral law, nor through natural law, nor through conscience or history. Neither is God's will revealed in the Decalogue or the teachings of Jesus when regarded as laws, norms, or universal principles. Neither an authoritative Church nor an authoritative Bible nor the historical life of Jesus reveal God's will. The Good, i.e., God's will is revealed only in the event in which the Divine "Thou" confronts the human "I" in the concrete situation. God's will is revealed to those who have faith in Jesus Christ. This is the sole basis of Christian action, the Divine Command which comes to each man in the concrete situations



of life. Christian ethics are unpredictable, and therefore non-legalistic, dynamic, ever fresh, unfettered by codes and endless rulings. The Christian thus has true freedom. Brunner holds forth that the Christian religion--the religion in which God confronts the human "I" as a "Thou," in which revelation is known in faith--ought to give the answer, the only and whole answer to the ethical problem. He says, "If it is certain that in the revelation given to it it does possess the truth, not a truth, the truth which is given by God, and not merely a truth which has been discovered by man, through the processes of knowledge, that it possesses absolute and not relative truth, then surely this certainly includes an affirmative answer to that particular question," i.e., the question as to whether the Christian faith gives the answer.<sup>1</sup> Brunner is convinced that through revelation we have the absolute truth and the answer to the ethical problem and to the question of the Good. The answer of Faith to the ethical problem is God's Word revealed in Jesus Christ. "Christian ethics is the science of human conduct as it is determined by Divine conduct."<sup>2</sup> Revelation is the basis of Christian ethics.

Since this is the foundation of the whole Christian ethic, we should perhaps attempt to clarify its meaning further. The entire volume, The Mediator, of over 600 pages, is given over to a discussion of this problem. It is full of paradoxes, penetrating, but oft-times confusing. It is impossible to summarize, but we will attempt to state here some of its important assertions, along with others of

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Divine Imperative, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 86.



Professor Brunner's, on this subject of revelation.

Christian revelation in its strict sense refers to the one unique and unrepeatable event of the Incarnation. God became man. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This event is wholly different from the mystical or speculative idea of revelation as "the emergence of the eternal basis of all phenomena into consciousness, the perception of something which was always true, the growing consciousness of a Divine Presence which might have been perceived before, since it was there all the time."<sup>1</sup> This seems to indicate that the event of Christ Incarnate does not reveal God's constant relation to man, His constant sustaining grace and love, but the Incarnation constitutes that relationship itself. Therefore, although Brunner maintains that he differs from Barth in believing in a general sustaining grace, his position here would indicate a similarity. For the relationship of the revelation to such intuitive insights as designated above is the same as its relation to all other general revelation such as contained in nature; and concerning his view of this relation Brunner says, "That which took place once and for all in Jesus Christ constitutes (italics mine) the truth of all other forms of revelation."<sup>2</sup> This hardly represents a dialectical relationship between the general and the specific revelation. Here one is inclined to say the general revelation is practically eliminated as such. Be this as it may, we can appreciate the emphasis Brunner is making that the event of God's special revelation in Jesus Christ is not merely a confirmation or fulfillment of general revelation but it contains an element of

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Mediator, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., note p. 25.



"absolute and never-recurring actuality."<sup>1</sup>

Brunner not only believes that the unique Christian revelation through the Mediator is not simply a fulfillment of general revelation or a difference in degree, but it is a different revelation in kind. Jesus Christ is not the flowering of a historical process, or the fulfillment of it. The revelation in Jesus Christ shatters history. General revelation may give the basis upon which man gropes after God, but it is distorted. General and special revelation are not complementary. "What the 'natural man' knows apart from Christ is not half the truth but distorted truth."<sup>2</sup> Revelation denies that Divine truth is a continuation of human thought. There is between man and God an abyss, a gulf--a gulf which only a special act of God can bridge. "The bridge over this abyss is the Mediator."<sup>3</sup>

This revelation in Jesus Christ is not merely that of a religious genius. "Even the greatest religious genius cannot forgive sin, cannot reconcile man with God; but he himself has need of forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus even the greatest genius is essentially the same as the meanest mortal on earth, therefore he cannot be the mediator."<sup>4</sup> Faith in a real mediator, "in the event which took place once for all, a revealed atonement--is the Christian religion itself."<sup>5</sup> This sets Christianity over against all other religions. It is based

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 33. In this connection one of Brunner's self-contradictions occurs, for he says in the same book (p. 513) that the knowledge through general revelation is not false, but it is "partial truth, half truth." And again (p. 414), "Thus even outside the Christian revelation of the Bible man is not without God nor without truth."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 40.



upon a revelation different in kind, not merely in degree, and therefore cannot be regarded as the fulfillment of the partial revelation in other religions. This consideration is a basic element in missions as well as in ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus stands in a different relationship to God than other men. The Person of Jesus Christ--not the historical and psychological personality--was the Person of God. Therefore he is Lord. He is not merely a man who received and spoke God's Word, he is the Word Incarnate. He is God's utterance from beyond our realm. "This Word which comes to us from the realm which lies beyond all human and historical possibilities, is here, as a person; Jesus Christ is this Word from the other side. Thus He Himself is the One who has come 'down to us from above.'"<sup>2</sup> He in his Person is God, while in his flesh he is man.

The experience of forgiveness as a personal relationship between God and man is impossible apart from this special event. All other and general revelations give man only ideas, general principles, impersonal concepts regarding God, but in this event God does not give man ideas, principles, or general concepts--He gives Himself. "The personal God is to be known in his personal revelation in Jesus Christ. The 'singularity' of this historical fact is identical with the personal nature of this revelation."<sup>3</sup> Here alone is there an actual

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<sup>1</sup>The uniqueness and different nature of the Christian revelation which sets it over against other religions has been forcefully set forth in a theology almost identical with Brunner's on this point by Dr. H. Kraemer in his recent book, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World (Harper & Bros., N.Y., 1938).

<sup>2</sup>Brunner, The Mediator, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup>Emil Brunner, God and Man, translated by David Cairns, (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1936), p. 67.



meeting of the Divine "Thou" and the human "I". Only when this event is personally experienced in a man through faith is forgiveness possible. Justification is by faith. Only in this event, also, is man confronted by the personal command of God. Until a man has experienced this event which took place once and for all in Jesus Christ, until he has thus been confronted with the personal God who gives himself and claims man's obedience, there is no possibility of a true Christian ethic. Apart from the experience of this event and of justification by faith and the hearing of the Divine Command, there is no Christian ethic--only some form of idealistic legalism or eudaemonistic realism. The experience of this unique revelation in Jesus Christ and the experience of the Divine Command are one. Man does not, in this experience, judge Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, but he is judged by Jesus Christ, forgiven, and claimed for God's love and service. When man in faith is thus apprehended by God and experiences forgiveness in the coming of God to him, he knows that his salvation is unconditional, the result of God's grace alone. Such a man is no longer motivated by a stern sense of duty, but by love. The love of God constrains him.

God's love which confronts us and claims us in Jesus Christ is not only the norm of good action, but is also the subject of good action. When a man is conquered by the love of God and has faith his life becomes spontaneously ethical. God's Spirit produces the fruit of ethical living. God's love for us is the foundation and source of our love for our neighbor.

This revelation of Himself does not give us a code of ethics. There is no universal law that guides the saved. "Right action can



be nothing else than that you should satisfy his (God's) claim which he makes here and now, and thus upon you, in the absolute concreteness and uniqueness of the situation."<sup>1</sup> The Divine Command which comes to us in revelation thus comes in every concrete situation. God speaks to the believer in the "existential moment," at the time of decision. Thus the man who acts in faith is always free, "for he is bound by nothing but God's 'guidance' at the moment."<sup>2</sup>

A rather puzzling question arises at this point regarding the relationship of the revelation as the event which took place in Jesus Christ 2000 years ago which is absolutely unique and unrepeatable, and the event in which each believer is confronted in every concrete situation by the Divine Command in Jesus Christ. How could revelation be "once and for all" and yet be ever repeated in every concrete situation?

Barth's phrase is as suggestive as any could be in this connection, when he speaks of "contingent contemporaneous revelation." Through faith the Christian is contemporaneous with Jesus Christ. Through faith in the event which happened 2000 years ago, the event becomes contemporaneous with the believer; i.e., God comes to him. The eternal Jesus Christ, the Mediator, reconciles the believer to God, forgives him, and claims him for God--and this event is the same as that which took place 2000 years ago, an event which is a paradox, occurring in time, yet timeless. It is a real event, a real act of God, a real revelation in every concrete situation, yet it is the same event as of 2000 years ago--God coming to man and claiming him.

This is why revelation is not found in the Bible as such, or

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 88

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 90



in the historical details of the life of Jesus. These are witnesses to the event, but they do not constitute it. Revelation is always an act of God. The Bible is not the Word of God, but through it the Word does speak to us, here and now, when we have faith. The one fundamental Word of God, claims Brunner, which the whole Bible proclaims is the message of Jesus Christ. "The Bible is the 'crib in which Christ lies.'<sup>1</sup>" When this is recognized, "then inevitably the preference for the Synoptic Gospels and for the actual words of Jesus, which was the usual position of the last generation, will disappear."<sup>1</sup> This position of Brunner's is obviously a dangerous one and is not necessarily a part of true faith. Discrediting this may be necessary, as well as qualifying to some extent his added statement that "the God who speaks to us in the Bible speaks to us nowhere else."<sup>2</sup> Yet Brunner's point is well taken to the degree that a distinction must be made between general revelation and the Christian revelation. We might question his insistence that the Bible speaks to us only in its witness to Jesus Christ. Brunner points out that it is in this respect that it is a collective revelation as a whole. Both the prophets and the apostles witness to the Word. From his point of view, the Hebrew Scriptures as used by the Jews do not contain a true revelation any more than do history or nature, or any other religious literatures.

As before mentioned, just how all this written matter in the Bible produced by various people in various situations in the light of the need of those concrete situations becomes, now and then, in our

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Mediator, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 172.



concrete situations the living voice and Command of God is a "vast obscurity." Brunner maintains that it does. It happens through the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> In whatever manner it happens, the point is that this event, this "contingent contemporaneous revelation" in which God Himself really and actually meets us, is the basis of the Christian ethic; it is the bearer of the Divine Command. "The Christ, who as an historical figure is the One who offered His life on the Cross as an expiatory oblation and sacrificed it once for all, is also the One who speaks to us in the intimacy of faith. . . . In us God speaks His Word."<sup>2</sup>

God's Word spoken in us is Love. His Divine Command is to love our neighbor. "Only in the Mediator," says Brunner, "is the will of God, that is, the Good, known as Love."<sup>3</sup> The ethic of love can only be a religious ethic, for Love is a Divine, not a human possibility--it can exist only where it is given. "Therefore love is the Word of the Divine Revelation and Grace."<sup>4</sup> The Cross reveals what love is --forgiveness and a coming to share the life of sinful man. Love is a restoration of fellowship, the creation of true community--thus it fulfills the Law. When a man in faith comes within the activity of God, when he is apprehended by the Divine Love, then he can love his neighbor--and this is the Divine Command. "He who wills to serve God must exercise love and mercy, must know himself one with the need of his people. This is the service which is well-pleasing to God, and this

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Divine Imperative, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> Brunner, The Mediator, pp. 527-8. <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 603. <sup>4</sup> Ibid.



is the Good."<sup>1</sup> This establishes true community which is the will of God--the Kingdom of God. While God draws man to Himself, he does not draw him out of the world, but sends him into the world to serve and love his neighbor.

Nothing but obedience to the will of God is good.

But, to be obedient to the will of God means: 'love your neighbor!' Hence the content of the commandment is not an abstract law, not a programme that can be known beforehand and codified, but it means a swift responsiveness to the needs of others, and action in accordance with their needs in their particular circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

In this statement it appears that the content of the command is to be determined by the natural factors in the situation as apprehended by the person who is motivated by love. But Brunner will not admit that this is what he means, for he insists that God alone can tell us in the concrete situation what it means to love. Love cannot be perceived as a universal principle "but only in the act in which He speaks to us Himself. . . . He tells us Himself what it means to 'love' here and now."<sup>3</sup> Brunner apparently means that the believer will receive authoritative, unambiguous guidance from a source external to himself through the divine revelation. Otherwise there would be no assurance that the Christian religion offered the truth, not a truth in answer to the ethical problem, and Brunner has indicated clearly that he believes the Christian faith possesses absolute and not relative truth.<sup>4</sup> Yet we shall see that this affirmation

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Divine Imperative, p. 54. <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 118. <sup>4</sup> Cf. above, p. 16.



is qualified by Brunner's further discussion on the Divine Command. Be that as it may, Brunner is emphasizing that the revelation although given once and for all is also dynamic, and Christian ethics can thus never be legalistic. The Divine Command to love our neighbor comes in the concreteness of each moment and in each situation. It is therefore unpredictable. Genuine Christian conduct will appear to others, quite often, to be unaccountable.

To be in God's love is the commandment, the gift, and the revelation. God's revelation, his action, defines love--the Good--and lays upon us the Divine Command. Since the whole subject of ethics is the relationship between man and God and the discernment of God's requirements from man, let us turn now to a more thorough analysis and discussion of the Divine Command, which is the central fact upon which Brunner's system of ethics is developed in The Divine Imperative. We will take up his discussion now as to (1) who commands, (2) who is commanded, (3) who is the neighbor, (4) what is commanded.



## CHAPTER II

### THE DIVINE COMMAND

#### Who Commands

We know God through his revelation. He is not in a class with other objects. He is subject. He is the source of our question about him. The general revelation of our own hearts and of the world around us testifies of God as source and creator. Yet our conscience, reason, and the testimony of the natural world only tell us that God is, but they cannot reveal who he is. God Himself must tell us who he is in his revelation, given in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by the Bible. All the prophets and apostles are saying the same thing about God, each in his own way. They all speak of the one God,

not only as eternally enthroned above all temporal change, the invisible spirit above all earthly affairs, but as the One who has purposes for man, who does not leave man to his own devices. . . . . God has mercy on men; He even comes to those who do not come to Him; He troubles himself about them. . . . . For He wants to gather them, to bring them home; He does not want them to remain lost; He wants them with Himself.<sup>1</sup>

God not only calls men, He himself comes to them. "The voices of the prophets are the single voice of God, calling. Jesus Christ is God Himself coming."<sup>2</sup> God in Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, Our Faith, Translated by John W. Rilling, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 8, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 9.



Yet God is hidden in impenetrable mystery. His Person is veiled in the flesh of man in Jesus. We know nothing of Him except what He has revealed to us. And even his revelations manifest more plainly how inaccessible He is to our thought and imagination. "God is not the world. Therefore He is also exalted above our knowledge. He is mystery."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore God is the Holy One. He sees into the hidden recesses of the heart, and He judges us, for He wants something from us, and His will is absolute, unconditioned. He wills to be Lord. He wants our unconditional obedience. His absolute holiness with its demand for our absolute obedience destroys our pride and ego, until with Isaiah we say, "Woe is me, for I am undone." The disobedient dash themselves to pieces against His holiness. His absolute righteousness stands forever--it is utterly trustworthy. He who withstands God will shatter himself to pieces. This is God's wrath.

But the mystery of God is even deeper. This holy God wills one thing only--love. His feeling for us is infinite love. "Fellowship, is the one thing he wants absolutely . . . . He created us for fellowship, and that He might have fellowship with us."<sup>2</sup> He seeks in love to regain that fellowship which man cast away. God's mercy seeks to save the lost. Verily, He is the "Hound of Heaven" who will not give up the pursuit. "That the Heavenly King, whose majesty is inconceivable, comes down to seek his unfaithful child in all his squalor, is the love of God as the Gospel

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 14.



and only the Gospel knows."<sup>1</sup>

Although the world should, as God's marvelous work, reveal Him as Creator and Lord, yet it does not, because of man's sin. Only intimations of God are known through nature. So God gave us the Bible. "In it He has also drawn His own portrait so that we must all perceive that He is truly the Creator. The name of this picture is Jesus Christ. In him we know the Creator for the first time as He really is. For in him we know God's purpose for creation."<sup>2</sup> As Lord and Creator He claims us wholly. We belong to Him, body and soul.

Creator does not simply mean that a divine being created the world. To believe in God as Creator means to believe in Him as Lord--to know that you wholly belong to Him--you are His slave. "To believe in God the Creator means to obey God the Lord."<sup>3</sup> I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart--this is the basis of Christian ethics, for it is this to which Jesus Christ brings us in restoring our true manhood which consists in this relationship of filial love and obedience to God.

God's purpose and goal, partially revealed to Moses and the prophets, is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. His purpose is "reconciliation, salvation, forgiveness of sins, promise of eternal life, fulfilment of all things in God's own life."<sup>4</sup> This indicates that God's purpose is concerned primarily with individuals and not with society. The evidence indicates that Brunner has no true conception

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 15. <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18. <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 20. <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 24.



of social salvation, and therefore in the last analysis, no social gospel.<sup>1</sup> In his thinking, this age and this world in which we live, though created good and orderly by God has been de-ranged by demonic forces and sin until it is meaningless. But God is able to use its madness which crucified His Son to reveal His love. He admits the inability of man to solve the problem of evil and advises him to trust the riddle to God in confidence that it will be solved in the day of judgment. By clinging to the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God and to the belief that nothing happens without God's will, Brunner gets into very difficult problems in relation to the problem of evil, as well as being led by this doctrine inevitably into the doctrine of election.

God's creative power is conceived of largely as a past action, and His redemptive work is still in the future, while we live in the de-ranged world in between. His faith is in the life after death. As far as this world and age is concerned it is allowed to remain in despair. There is no virile faith that God is going to be able to re-arrange this creation--although Brunner now and then suggests that it can be improved. Yet one the whole, Brunner seems to think that this age is going to remain in its desperate condition, de-ranged as it is by evil and sin. Protestant ethics, he claims, are interim ethics--for the period between creation and redemption, rather than for creation and redemption in this world.

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<sup>1</sup>The "orders" are not to be redeemed, but are to be ended, when the Kingdom comes. Cf. The Divine Imperative, p. 400. On the other hand his emphasis is more optimistic in his booklet, The Church and the Oxford Group, translated by David Cairns (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), where he calls for a faith in the triumphant and conquering Christ who calls society also to a new life.



Brunner's eschatology is confusing, though apparently important to his thought. At times it appears that God's Kingdom is to be brought forth on earth, for God is said to will to use men to build his Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Yet again he speaks of it as a coming heavenly Kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup> His idea seems to be that God has done enough, and we are to do that which maintains life in this world which God created and which is de-ranged by sin until it is recreated in the new age.<sup>3</sup> The most important thing we can do is to retreat from ourselves and rely on the work of Jesus Christ who removes sin and death. While having early in the book indicated the possibility of the Kingdom being created on earth, later we find that he does not believe any very significant advance is made on earth--rather the Kingdom is on the defensive. Christians are to hold the fort and proclaim the coming Kingdom. Only at the End will God's great act (apparently apocalyptic) defeat the enemy.<sup>4</sup> Apparently social salvation is impossible, yet Brunner claims the Church must awaken "social conscience" in relation to economic ills, and awaken "the conviction that to faith nothing is impossible" and proclaim "the growing Kingdom of God."<sup>5</sup> Yet taken all in all, Brunner's position appears to be in fundamental agreement with the majority of writers who expressed their views in the recent volume, The Kingdom of God and History.<sup>6</sup> This book, with

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Divine Imperative, pp. 128, 284.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 207.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 250.    <sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 287-288; Cf. also p. 482, where he states that the new world lies beyond history.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 438    <sup>6</sup> H. G. Wood and others, The Kingdom of God and History, (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1938).



the exception of Professor Lyman, represents what is termed the "Continental Theology." The goal of history is conceived of as lying beyond history and as attainable only through the revelation and power of a transcendent God. Demonic forces and sin control this age.<sup>1</sup> God will use them, showing He is still Master, but there is no confidence that He will overcome them; He will save men whom he elects or who respond in faith in spite of these forces, which will remain in power throughout history.

This belief that God is concerned mainly for individuals is consistent with Brunner's doctrine of eternal election. Our temporal life is pretty meaningless. "Temporal sense is nonsense," says Brunner. Although born into the world by natural biological processes, we come from eternity and have been thought and willed by God. We have an eternal origin and an eternal destiny. Brunner's Calvinism shows clearly here in his doctrine of eternal election. The doctrine is unavoidable to one who insists that there is no degree of mutuality in the process of salvation, but insists, as Brunner does, that salvation is wholly God's work and that man's relationship to God is unconditioned by anything he does. Faith itself is God's act, although Brunner tries to make it also a real act of man determined by God. The only admissible doctrine of election from eternity, as far as the writer is concerned, would be one which held

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<sup>1</sup> When some relative good attempts to become absolute, then it becomes daemonic. The capitalistic system in absolutizing itself and the State absolutizing itself are major instances of daemonic forces. When the Divine Order is perverted, then it becomes daemonic. "The 'daemonic' means being enslaved by something finite which is regarded as infinite and absolute." Cf. The Divine Imperative, p. 392.



that God loves every man "from eternity and for eternity," and elects or chooses to save them all. Only in faith does a man become aware of this election. But this does not mean that he must consider that God has not elected to save others, nor that his own decision and positive act of response had nothing to do with it. Brunner, however, insists that election does not take away the necessity of decision.

He says,

Election dawns upon no one except in the full, independent, obedient and trustworthy decision of faith. . . . Reason must bow here, yet dare not abdicate. How can the two be reconciled, the free eternal election of God and the responsible decision of man is a problem we cannot understand. But every believer knows they are compatible.<sup>1</sup>

Just how reason can bow, as Brunner suggests, but not abdicate is a rather fine distinction. One might suggest that there are some things which are not merely insoluble paradoxes, but impossible contradictions to which reason has no right to bow. Brunner admits that this doctrine of eternal election gives rise, on a purely logical basis, to the corollary of election of the lost to eternal damnation. However, he will not accept the corollary as a part of the Christian message--simply because the Bible does not specifically set forth the corollary. This is Biblicalism on a negative side. He does not hesitate to use logic in finding Biblical support for positions he does wish to accept.

Since God is transcendent and "wholly other," the Divine and infinite "Thou" standing over against the human finite "I", man must be satisfied whether he understands or not, and must yield his

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Our Faith, p. 32.



obedience. For obedience in faith to the will of God who is Creator, Lord, and Redeemer is the only good. But man can only do the good because of God's act. God's gracious act in Jesus Christ makes faith possible and at the same time bears the command to love God and our neighbor. But faith is not real unless it is also obedience. Spinoza's saying that men believe a thing when they behave as if it were true is pregnant with meaning in this connection. Faith is a result of God's activity, it has come into being through His act. Obedience to the Command which is also revealed to faith in the same act is man's response in action on the basis of that which has been given to him by God. If man refuses obedience, if he refuses to act in love, then his faith is not true. The two are linked together: "There is no faith, as such, apart from conduct."<sup>1</sup> And just as there is no pure and sinless conduct so also there is no pure faith. Ever we are believers and at the same time unbelievers: "Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief."

The Commandment of God is, says Brunner: "Love God--and your neighbor." But the Command is not abstract, but the personal command of the living God in the concrete situation. "I can only learn what it means at the moment at which God calls me; I can never know it beforehand."<sup>2</sup> Brunner admits that ultimately it is impossible to say what takes place at the point where the command is received, "but--penultimately--it is possible to say a great deal about it; and without this 'penultimate' truth we shall never understand the 'ultimate' truth in this matter."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 118. <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 112. <sup>3</sup> Ibid.



This statement proves most enlightening, and provides a key to an understanding of what appears at first a hopeless contradiction. It appeared to the writer that Brunner was developing an ethic on the basis of reason and natural revelation and trying to call it an ethic based on the unique revelation. But here is the key. The elements and truths found in general revelation should and can be understood, and by doing this we can know "penultimate" truth concerning the Divine Command--we can approach the ultimate truth which comes in the event in the concrete situation. If Brunner were not so fearful that a lucid and unambiguous description of a religious experience would be a sinful presumption of man, he might say that we can understand the elements that enter into the composition of the Divine Command up to a certain point. These elements are all relevant in every concrete situation, but in the concrete situation another and decisive element enters--the guidance of God's love, the revelation of His Word, which cannot be predetermined but known only in its actuality in the situation. This is the ultimate which we cannot describe but can only understand in the event of faith and the receiving of the Command. This ultimate element is decisive, for this revelation constitutes the truth of the other elements gathered from general revelation and common sense.<sup>1</sup> If I interpret Brunner correctly it seems to me that this is what he is saying. The ultimate act which introduces the decisive element into the concrete situation in which the Divine Command is heard, is God's revelation.

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<sup>1</sup>Upon such a basis as this Brunner would be somewhat justified in claiming to have the answer to the ethical problem--real divine guidance. However, when Brunner comes to discuss practical social problems, reason, not revelation is the constitutive principle.



It truly constitutes the Command. But all these other elements from general revelation or even general knowledge are necessary as a preparation for receiving the command. The specific and decisive factor--the unique revelation of God in the concrete situation--neither contradicts nor merely fulfills or synthesizes the other elements. Nor is this element which makes the Christian ethic dynamic and non-legalistic merely and "open awareness" to the "unpredictable emergent fullness of the concrete situation," as it is for Professor H. N. Wieman, to whom we shall refer later. No, the decisive factor is an act of the transcendent God--a personal act, and unpredictable, yet not wholly so. The task of Christian ethics is largely a preparation for the apprehension of God's command through an understanding of the "penultimate" truth, and its foundations in the general revelation.

Remembering that the "ultimate" consideration or element in the Divine Command is God's revelation in the concrete situation in which He claims us for His Love, let us now consider some of the "penultimate" factors which are relevant to the apprehension of the Divine Command. First we must concern ourselves with the nature of man who receives the command, then with the neighbor, and finally with the knowledge given in general revelation.

#### Who Is Commanded

The doctrine of man, like the doctrine of God, is derived from revelation, for only in its light do we truly understand what man is. And we must understand man who is commanded and who must act, else we cannot be ethical.



The first thing to be said is that God created man in His own image. This is emphasized and re-emphasized by Brunner. As an animal, a purely physical being, man is dust. But he is not merely animal. On the other hand he is not God, even in the depths of his soul. There is no identity of God and man. Human reason is not the same as divine reason. If God is in us at all it is not true immanence, but as an "Other." The voice of the better self is not the voice of man himself, but it is the command of this "Other," a "Thou" confronting his "I".<sup>1</sup>

But man is created by God in His own image. This means not an identity of man and God, but that man is a creature. He is not equal with God, but God's property. "He is not divine 'in his deepest nature' because in his deepest nature he is a sinner."<sup>2</sup> Yet being made in God's image, man is somehow similar to God. "What distinguishes man from the rest of creation is the share he has in God's thought, that is, reason as distinguished from mere perception. . . . Man can think into the eternal and infinite."<sup>3</sup> In distinguishing between divine reason and the human reason, Brunner insists that reason in man in its true sense is the ability given him by God to receive God's Word. We are therefore men only when we perceive the Divine Word. Through conscience man has always been able to perceive in some degree the voice of God, otherwise he would not be man at all. But man is distorted and can become truly man only "by receiving God's Word and--like a soldier repeating a command--repeating God's

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Brunner, Our Faith, p. 36.      <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 37.



Word."<sup>1</sup> This would indicate that man is merely an automaton. But Brunner insists that he is not, for he can always and constantly choose whether to obey or not. "Man is no automaton, he can and must continually decide how he is going to live. This capacity of deciding is the personal element in us, the free will."<sup>2</sup>

Freedom in Brunner's thought is thus seen to be limited to this choice of saying yes or no to God's Command. However, freedom could be given a richer meaning by a broad interpretation of what he has been saying. If man is to repeat God's Word, that could mean something profound and inclusive. For God's Word is creative activity, reason, and order. Therefore man should repeat God's creative activity, his reason and his order. But Brunner limits man's freedom. He doesn't want it ever to appear that man is equal in any way to God. Man's activity should be creative and redemptive, but in a very limited field. It can never be activity like God's, for everything that man has out of which to create, and the ability itself to create is given by God, and conditioned by His will. God's creative activity on the other hand is unconditioned. He creates out of nothing, and by the nature of his own being, not in virtue of something given to him.

But this is not the whole truth about man, for man is a fallen creature. The image of God in him has suffered extreme loss. It is not wholly lost, of course, or man would be a mere animal, inhuman. The original creation--man--had both form and content as

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 55.



the image of God. But the content has been destroyed, only the form remains. Reason and responsibility remain. Man is no longer the good creation which God brought forth. All men are now sinners, for all share in a universal nature which is depraved. Some men may be very good, from the ordinary moral point of view, and some bad, and this point of view as such needs not be discarded. But from the specifically religious or rather Christian point of view the distinction between the so-called good and the so-called bad is no longer valid. Even the best persons are bad--bad at their core. It is not that they have some little bad spot, some little weakness--no, like all mankind they are sinners at the heart and are moving in the wrong direction. All men are sinners. Our total life is perverse in its direction, in its tendency away from God. And this is sin--depravity--radical perversion from God. It is the attempt to be independent of God, to achieve our own good.

The doctrine of the Fall is the description of this reality--the basic sinfulness of human nature. The Fall is not a doctrine of the origin of sin. It is the doctrine of the existential "whence" rather than of a causal-metaphysical "whence." The origin of sin is a mystery, an inexplicable mystery which lies behind the words "original sin." This mystery makes any explanation of the fact of evil impossible. "Original sin" and "The Fall" are rather terms descriptive of a reality that is a mystery--the terrible and horrible reality, "the exceeding sinfulness of sin." These words indicate that sin is more than moralism or Pietism mean it to be. "The term means quite as much a 'cosmic potency' as a 'moral'



phenomenon."<sup>1</sup> Sin is a determination of "human" nature as it now is. It indicates the recognition that man in the essence of his nature is bad. His sin is not merely an impersonal evil but it indicates that man is personally sinful, at enmity with the will of God. "'Sin' means a man has torn himself away from his origin."<sup>2</sup> Sin is something positive--personal insubordination.

The story of the Fall "is only a vivid way of representing an abstract idea, namely, that we are indeed all responsible, but that our guilt is always regarded collectively."<sup>3</sup>

We have here another paradox. "It is the essence of our nature that we have been created by God. But it also belongs to the very essence of our nature that we are sinners."<sup>4</sup> Unlike some of Brunner's statements, this is the kind of paradox which is not an actual contradiction, and is true. The essence of our nature is reason, responsibility, choice. This was given us by God. But this gift is the source of sin, for without reason, responsibility and choice we could not be sinners. However, I think it is questionable that it follows from this that the total perverse direction of our life is away from God. The difficulty of the doctrine of man's utter sinfulness lies first in an artificial separation of sin and immorality, and secondly in a rather literal acceptance of a prior goodness of man who is now depraved and to which God alone can recall him. In order to maintain this position Brunner is apparently forced to postulate a belief that is a product of metaphysical speculation which he repudiates. He

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Mediator, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 145



holds that man is created pre-existent to this historical world, and that the Fall took place in some way in that other world. This enables him to hold to his Biblical doctrine in the face of scientific anthropology. He says:

The Christian religion and it alone takes faith in God as the Creator seriously. Hence it does not divide man into two parts, of which one is good and the other evil, but it claims that originally man as a whole was good, both in soul and body. Therefore even the new-born human being is not simply the being created by God. The good Creation lies beyond this visible world. The whole of history has been infected with the poison of sin. In the world of historical process there are no pure and sinless origins. It is not the empirical origin within time which is good, but Creation. The beginning within time, however, is for each individual an historical fact, and it is also connected with the whole of sinful history. This is the meaning of the doctrine of Original Sin.<sup>1</sup>

Brunner denies that this is religious speculation and says it is rather "the one and only serious interpretation of sin."<sup>2</sup> But it is still speculation, whatever one chooses to call it. It seems to me an empirical approach would be more realistic and without treating sin lightly or freedom lightly could still preserve more dignity for man. The very fact of a contradiction within man is not so much an indication of his very essence being sinful, egocentric, autonomous, but is a witness that his very essence is good, and is in continuous struggle with his animal nature above which he has so recently been placed. The whole point is whether the so-called "better-self" is truly of the essence of man, or whether the "lower-self" is of the essence of man's nature. We all know there is conflict between these two. But Brunner wants the "better-self" to be considered as an "Other." Man thereby becomes essentially the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 147.



"lower-self," the mere animal with its instinctive drives and desires living by the law of the jungle. But by the logic of his own position he is confusing the issue. What he is calling human nature and insisting is sinful is just what human nature is not. The "better-self" is that which makes a man human in contradistinction to the animals. If he would forget the speculative idea that man was once perfect, and realize that what happened was that in God's creative work he at one place brought to birth in animals of a high type what we call consciousness, awareness of the distinction of good and evil, reason, choice, and that immediately the spirit of reason found itself locked in struggle with its animal heritage, and has been struggling slowly upward against it ever since, he might have a more realistic view of man. This in no way destroys the seriousness of sin, nor the recognition of its stubborn resistance to God's creative will, nor does it exalt human reason to the place of God. Reason is not necessarily a pretension of man trying to be autonomous. An empirical reason does accept the given as given. It recognizes its dependence. It too can recognize that man's autonomy, his freedom, is a gift. But Brunner, along with all the Barthians, seems to think God cannot be exalted unless man is debased. He cannot think of God as still engaging in the creative process of bringing true man into being, but must think wholly in terms of a future redemption--when they are to be restored to a past relationship and nature.<sup>1</sup> Therefore though he looks to the future, he really is not looking forward,

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<sup>1</sup> This statement must be qualified to some degree in the light of Brunner's statement in his booklet on the Oxford Group that Christ frees us not only from guilt of sin, but also from its tyranny. (p.58). But even here he adds that this must be understood "eschatologically."



but backward. He must maintain that there is a fatal gulf--a fathomless abyss--fixed between man and God which only God can bridge.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the only way man can know himself and at the same time hear God's Command, is for God to come to him. But there is still the problem of how such a sinner could have faith. Brunner evidently here relies upon enough general revelation and upon sufficient validity of human reason--the damaged image of God--to show man that he is in a blind alley. Man, forced into a position of despair over human possibilities, experiencing crisis, and condemned by his own conscience, which somehow reveals God's law written on the heart, cries out to God--and in this he has the presupposition of faith, through which God's revelation and command can come to him.

Justification by faith is the sole way of salvation. Man's sinfulness and disobedience to God, which prohibits him from knowing the good, can be overcome only by faith. Because man's very will is sinful there is no possibility of the realization of the good by man. "Good is always the Gift of God," not man's achievement. Brunner maintains that there is a certain blindness of the moral consciousness and an evil which resides in "being good" on merely ethical lines. Man can know God's will--the true Good--only when he ceases to seek

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<sup>1</sup> In his later discussions Brunner makes less of the idea of the "fathomless abyss" separating man and God, and places more emphasis upon the validity of the partial truth of general revelation. Cf. his article in The Christian Understanding of Man (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., Chicago, 1938), where his central thesis is that "man is a 'theological' being; that is, his ground, his goal, his norm, and the possibility of knowing his own nature are all in God." The very essence of man is that although fallen and sinful, he is made in the image of God and is related to God as a responsible person. The specifically human element in man is his responsible relation to God



for his own righteousness by human works and relies on God's gift and revelation, and knows he is justified by faith.

Since man is so corrupt, then God must be solely responsible for any goodness of man. There can be no complementary human effort. "God addresses the unrighteous as though they were righteous--not because they will be righteous one day, but because they are 'right' in His sight, because He wills it so. Without any complementary human effort man receives, purely as a gift, that justification which he seeks in vain to attain for himself."<sup>1</sup> In Jesus Christ God addressed sinful man, and addresses him in contingently contemporaneous revelation. That act, apprehended in faith and the creator of faith, enables man to receive his life, his very self as a gift from God. No longer is his life a legalistic straining after God. He is born into a new life of freedom, of spontaneous love of God and neighbor. His trust is now utterly in God, and he has the promise of becoming like Christ. This is regeneration. The new creation comes to birth. But it is not a sudden perfection. "The old man still remains visible, but under the husk of the old, lives the new and begins to discard the old. Something visible begins to break forth from the invisible faith. It is love, a new manner of life, thought and speech, a new way of dealing with one's neighbor."<sup>2</sup> Inasmuch as faith and

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and his fellowmen. Man's relation to God is what makes him a man. Man's essential being has been perverted by sin but not annihilated by it. Our sense of responsibility is ambiguous, and the Mediator must restore our true nature, but the idea of the abyss is absent.

<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Divine Imperative, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Brunner, Our Faith, pp. 105-106.



and obedience are inextricably bound up together both are only partial when one is only partial. And in the historical sphere both are always partial, but in faith the direction of our life has been changed. We must be constantly forgiven, justified, by God in order to have continued relations with him. And inasmuch as our faith and obedience are only partial--our love and devotion to God incomplete --we are still in a measure under Law, but its purpose is now more instruction than demand. But on the other hand, inasmuch as we do have faith we are freed from the ego tyrant and are able, in love, to serve God and our neighbor. Our ethical living is thus wholly God's work. Ultimately He is the "doer" and our trust must be completely in Him. "Since God alone is good, and man is a sinner, God alone can be considered the subject of good conduct, i.e. the Holy Spirit, who in faith begets the new will. But this new will is only real in the obedience of faith."<sup>1</sup> God alone must receive all the glory. For the obedience of the new creature is obedience "wrought in us by God Himself."<sup>2</sup>

The destiny of man is death, for that is the judgment upon the old Adam which is never entirely thrown off. Yet there is a resurrection and Life beyond this age--that is the promise given in Christ. But more, Eternal life begins now, where fellowship with Christ begins. The destiny of each individual believer is Eternal life. What man's historical destiny shall be is apparently as it has been--bankruptcy! Brunner, as suggested before, is not clear on this issue. His interest is confined solely to individual destiny.

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 152. <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 162.



### Who Is the Neighbor

We have pointed out that Brunner's ethical system is based upon justification by faith, through which the believer is able to answer spontaneously God's call to love one's neighbor. The natural question that was raised in the New Testament arises, "And who is my neighbor?" If to serve God we must serve our neighbor, who is it that is to receive our sacrificial service? To whom is our action in obedience to God to be directed?

God has willed that we find Him in man. "That God meets us in the Man Jesus means that in giving Himself to us He also gives us our brother man."<sup>1</sup> Brunner is wholesomely insistent on this point. Because of the Incarnation, "it is possible to recognize in each man the God who comes to us. The Incarnation of God is the fact in which theocracy and humanity are inseparably united. Henceforth there is no love of God which can ignore man, and no love of man which can ignore God."<sup>2</sup> This signifies a type of Christian humanism. God calls us to personal relationships--to true community. But it is not an idea of humanity that we are to serve. "There are no Ends, Ideas, Goods, Values, no abstract entities, neither Culture, nor the State, nor 'sphere of Spirit' to which the human personal life can be subordinated,"<sup>3</sup> but only the one end, community between persons. And the neighbor whom God calls us to serve is not an abstraction. "We cannot love 'humanity'--though we can get enthusiastic and sentimental about humanity--we can only love the individual concrete person with whom we come into contact."<sup>4</sup> The Christian ethic is an

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 190. <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 55. <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 191. <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 192.



ethic for personal relations. The ethics of love cannot be the ethics of social relations. It cannot be applied to relations within the orders.

The Christian command does not refer simply to the service of the soul of our neighbor, although this service is primary. We are not called to serve merely the body of our neighbor. No, we are called to serve our neighbor as a whole, as a personality--body, mind, and spirit.

The neighbor is the person with whom we are in relationship in any concrete situation. And God calls us to love the person with whom we are in concrete relationship just as he is. We are to serve him, not because of some idea of what he may become, but simply because God has given him to us in the concrete situation.

Yet, our service to our neighbor must take into account the whole environment. The historical situation, the culture, the economic situation all are a part of the concrete man--he cannot be an abstraction from them. Therefore when we are called to love our neighbor we are called to serve his whole being, which includes these factors. There are values in this contemporary world which we should support, but not as ends in themselves. "Value" means: for a person who is 'there.' . . . . Through divine appointment, certain things are due to, necessary or useful for life: such things are values, but nothing else at all.<sup>1</sup> Therefore to serve concrete men, we must also serve humanity. But this must never take the place of service to concrete individuals and become the service of an abstraction. In

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 195.



our service of humanity we are out of the specifically Christian realm of ethics, which are for personal relations, and are in an area in which direct revelation apparently plays a smaller part. In this area our service is that of our "office" as a part of the "ordinances" which God has given to hold society together. This we shall discuss later in more detail. In this area as we serve the community, we may have to do actions which apparently are harmful to some individuals in the concrete situation.

Having clarified this issue as to whom we are to serve, let us now turn to the important discussion of what we are to do. What service does God want us to render?

#### What Is Commanded

We have said that the command of God is unpredictable. No man can tell another what he ought to do in any concrete situation. God alone can tell him what to do in each instance. Christian ethics is therefore a preparation for the decision. Although we cannot know exactly what to do in any situation beforehand, we do not need to fall into the opposite error of a fanatical antinomianism.

Since our activity is to be that which is obedient to the will of God, then our obedience can be nothing other than imitation of His activity as Creator and Redeemer.

Unfortunately, however, Brunner does not imply by this that the Command will be for us to be creative and redemptive in the full rich sense of these words. God as Creator means that we must be first of all conservative, with due reverence for that which is. "This world, as it is--in spite of everything--is God's world. It is this



world which He wills, His creation. This life in its incomprehensible variety, is not accidental--however little we can understand the fact that this life is not accidental; it is what it is through the will of God."<sup>1</sup>

This means, claims Brunner, that God as Creator speaks his command to us through the creation just as it is now--for paradoxically he holds that it represents God's action just as it is, and also that creation as it now is has been de-ranged by evil. In spite of this de-rangement, God's first will is for us to preserve his creation as it is, and hear his command through it as it is. "God's command for the actual moment reaches us through the world around us, with all its pressure and its restrictions. Even the historically 'given' must be regarded primarily as God's Command, telling us to adjust ourselves to it. Since it is the will of God to 'conserve' life, we should do so as well."<sup>2</sup>

It is well to note right here a confusion in Brunner's system of thought as he presents it. He has previously spoken of the Command as a Divine revelation coming to us through the Holy Spirit. But now he says the Divine Command "reaches us through the world around us." This use of the term "Divine Command" for two different factors which enter into the ethical decision is confusing.

To continue with Brunner's thought, he points out that this "conservative" command is balanced in the Christian ethic by the revelation of God as Redeemer. Since sin has distorted the creation,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 125.



God's will does not come to us directly through the situation as it is, but indirectly. The command is to preserve that which God created, as he created it, not as it is distorted by sin. The End God has in mind is simply the restoration of his creation, which means its perfection. We must therefore seek its restoration and perfection, as well as its preservation. Therefore "the Christian Ethos is revolutionary" as well as conservative. But the primary duty of man is conservation--to adopt an attitude of affirmation, acceptance, and adjustment to the claims of life as it is. Secondly we have a share in the creation of a new world. "In the world of history the Risen Lord, even though hidden, wills to build His Kingdom by means of men as His instruments," but the Kingdom of the Devil will not be overcome in this world, and "this fact sets a definite limit to the possibilities of man's creative activity in this sphere."<sup>1</sup>

These two aspects of the command do not cancel each other out. The command of the Creator "tells us in what sphere we have to act. In so doing He gives our activity a basis of solid reality. The will of the Redeemer, on the other hand, gives motive and direction to our conduct."<sup>2</sup> The first aspect of the command gives realism to our ethic, keeping our feet on the ground. The second gives idealism--devotion to that which is to be--the new creation.

Not only do we have some knowledge of the nature of the command as being always the "conservative" and the "revolutionary" imperative of the Creator and Redeemer, but we also know that Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 163.



ethics--obedience to God's command--includes the virtues. For though the Command of God, "so far as the subject is concerned, requires one thing only: existence in love, . . . this implies the existence of every 'virtue.'"<sup>1</sup> Love is not an isolated act, but a personal form of existence--the flowing forth of love, the Divine love through the thuman channel. To live this life of love is to attain a spontaneously virtuous relationship with others. Peaceableness and truthfulness, for instance, represent personal relations in which a man recognizes the claim of others upon him. The virtues are not for self-improvement, but responses to the claims of our neighbors upon us, and thus responses to God's claim upon us, for he meets us in our neighbor.

Law is also relevant to the Divine Command, and a presupposition of it. Brunner discusses law in a threefold sense: as the Lex, the simple legal morality of the community, which requires simple obedience; as radical law, absolute in its demand, which calls us to repentance; and law as guidance for the expression of love.

Law as Lex is given by God to preserve the external forms of community, and thus of life itself. These laws are based upon compulsion and are in the Christian sense "sub-ethical." However, since it is through this Lex that God preserves the orders of the world, sinful though they are, the Christian is under obligation to obey them, and they are part of the Divine Command. However, the Christian is to obey them only conditionally, or with reservations, for he is called also to a revolutionary way of life. The Commandments of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 163.



Bible when understood as law belong in this same category of Lex.

But law, particularly the Biblical law has also another function: that is, to bring us face to face with the One great command, to love God with all our being. God wants us for himself. All the law is only a part of this one thing. And when the law is understood radically it is seen not as various separate commands, but God's call for our whole self. No man can obey this command. In fact, no man can obey all the laws of the Bible. When he attempts to do so he is forced into despair. When he reaches this, God's revelation in the Cross shows him forgiveness, and the God who gives. "This is the dialectical element in the Law: it leads directly to the true knowledge of God."<sup>1</sup> The laws of the Bible, including the Sermon on the Mount sharpen the conscience and finally drive the soul into despair through radical penitence. As law, these teachings are impossible to meet. But when repentance is brought on, then a man is brought to the place where God can really speak to him and give Himself to him.

There is then the third aspect of law. Not only is law as the preserver of community to be obeyed legalistically, nor is it a value alone in bringing men to repentance as an absolute requirement, but for the man who is in faith the laws of the Bible have the third function of providing guidance for concrete action. The Holy Spirit does speak to us, but usually only upon the basis of the Biblical witness. The Spirit expounds the law. The commandments of the Bible are therefore absolutely necessary. For the believer, all

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 146.



Biblical law becomes explication of the first commandment--the fundamental law of love. The Law does provide a sort of principle from which concrete action patterns can be deduced for actual situations. Here Brunner qualifies his previous denouncements of the deduction of action patterns from principles. He says, "From the law of love the believer can now himself deduce laws, since he 'applies' it to particular cases. The claim to know the Good beforehand, to be able to 'deduce' it from the principle of love, which primarily and in principle we must condemn as a misunderstanding of the nature of the Good, is not to be totally condemned--but only if it is regarded as a final principle."<sup>1</sup> Such deductions from the law of love are valuable in giving guidance for concrete action in the actual situation when not used legalistically. "Whatever I can determine beforehand from the principle of love for a definite situation in life must be illuminating for me in the concrete instance of decision, it ought to direct me towards the Divine Command itself."<sup>2</sup> A system of ethics designed from an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount as Law would be of highest significance for a man of faith as a guide and preparation for decision in the concrete situation. Although he himself cannot hold to the Sermon on the Mount legalistically, such an interpretation would give valuable guidance in the apprehension of the Command to love his neighbor. The law of the Bible to the believer is thus "no longer the command of the Lord to the slave but the instruction of the father to the son."<sup>3</sup> It gives general direction, and helps the man of faith not to make a mistake in

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 150.



misapprehending the command of love, although at times he may have to act contrary to the Sermon on the Mount when it is interpreted as law--but having the law he will do so with extreme caution.

This triple consideration of law as relevant to the Command will need a further treatment following our next subject of consideration, namely, service of our neighbor as commanded by God.

Love of God is impossible without love of one's neighbor. Likewise, service of God is impossible without service of one's neighbor. Our service to our fellowmen is our sacrifice to God--not in order to appease Him or reconcile Him, but as our cultus--our reasonable and rational worship. We are, as Paul suggests, to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God. But this sacrifice--this reasonable worship of God, who has come to us in forgiveness and love--can only be in the form of service to our neighbor. "God who is revealed in the Incarnation does not desire this service for Himself, but for humanity."<sup>1</sup> This service, as we noted in our consideration of the neighbor, must be to the whole man, which includes body, mind, spirit, and also social environment. God therefore requires of us a great variety of service.

All things which are done as means to the One End--the dominion or reign of God--are services to God. This alone is Good. Nothing is good unless it is hallowed by this end. Nothing is good but obedience to God. But the purpose of God includes service of human life, "both of the individual and of the community as a whole. Nothing can be devout which in its final intention and effect is unhuman.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 188.



God never commands anything which is contrary to love.<sup>1</sup> But sometimes there is conflict between personal service and service to the community as a whole. How are we to act in such a situation? This is answered by the doctrine of the "office." But preliminary to a discussion of this doctrine we must get the doctrine of the "calling" before us.

To the believer God's call is wholly personal and concrete. He is not called to obey impersonal laws or principles, nor to do "something in general." Through the Holy Spirit God calls each believer personally to do something which he alone is required to do. He calls the man just as he is--a sinner--and just where he is, to serve Him. This is God's grace, "the justification of the sinner, that God calls him just as he is."<sup>2</sup> And though the service rendered is by a sinful man, it is hallowed by this call. All service is tainted by sin, for no one is truly pure. But God covers the sinfulness by his forgiveness and accepts the service.

That a man is called to serve just where he is rests back upon the absoluteness of God as sovereign Creator. Since God Himself places us where we are, then His call to service is naturally in the place where we are. Also since the call comes in the concrete situation, it must come to us where we are. This Divine Call forgives the past and sanctifies the action--tainted with sin though it be--which is given in obedience to God. This alone enables us to act in good conscience. For apart from this Calling and justification by faith only two courses remain open, claims Brunner: renunciation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 199.



world, or compromise.<sup>1</sup> Likewise it prevents a person from becoming an impersonal reformist whose whole life becomes an unceasing endeavour to alter conditions, while the personal meaning of life is forgotten, and personal relations of love are not experienced. Reform is not thereby denied as a part of the Christian ethic, but it comes under one's duty in the exercise of one's "office."

Through the Calling, which is the apprehension of the Divine Command, one also escapes from the baffling conflict of the demands of abstract duties. The Law does indicate duties, but for the believer they are not legalistically conceived. In the concrete situation, with the requirements of these duties in mind, and in the spirit of faith the believer listens to the Divine Command, which tells him, claims Brunner, the one and only one thing which it is his true duty to do in that situation. The believer will always feel the oppression and pressure of conflicting duties, but he will also know the one thing which is required of him. This in no manner opens the way for a self-righteousness. He must recognize that his action is still tainted by sin, and that often evils result from his action. His reliance is still upon God's forgiveness. In the full light of the moral and ethical requirements laid upon him by the Lex and by the Biblical Law, in full view of the ultimate results of his decision as far as he can see them, in keen awareness of the conflicts of duties in the concrete situation and of the evil which will accompany any choice, the believer waits for the Divine Command, which is the Calling, and then does that one thing in humility, relying

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<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Temple solves this problem by saying that God wills the compromise. Cf. his article in The Christian Faith and Common Life.



upon God's gracious forgiveness. "God," says Brunner, "takes over all responsibility for our action in the world which in itself is sinful, if we, on our part, will only do here and now that which the present situation demands from one who loves God and his neighbor."<sup>1</sup> But this does not remove the tension between the demand of the absolute law of God and the reality in which we act. It does however keep it from rising so high that it deadens all action in our relative and sinful world. We are called to serve in this sinful world, but to do our duty here as members of the coming Kingdom of God. "The Here and Now constitute the necessary narrowness, the vision of the coming Kingdom, the necessary breadth for right action within one's calling."<sup>2</sup> In this manner both fanaticism and self-complacency are avoided.

The Calling refers mainly to our service in personal relations. Our service to our neighbor in the wider area of his social environment gets us into the field of social institutions or the natural orders. Here our service is the performance of our duties in our "office." It is in connection with Brunner's doctrine of the natural orders that he departs most sharply from Karl Barth.

Service must be to the whole man, we have said. Brunner maintains that God has ordained or created certain orders which minister to human life and in a certain degree force men into community with one another. Our neighbor is a member of these orders, and they are a part of his social personality, and we can serve him only by

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<sup>1</sup>Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 207.



conserving and revolutionizing these orders.<sup>1</sup> As Creator, God first requires us to adjust ourselves to these orders, and to support them. But inasmuch as they are corrupted by sin, God as Redeemer requires us to ignore them and initiate a new line of action in relation to the Kingdom of God which is coming. We are to accept the natural order, but also in obedience to God's will seek its perfection and redemption. However, "the preservation and furtherance of the natural life is not the distinctively Christian command to love our neighbor."<sup>2</sup> This service is needful, but the distinctively Christian service is concerned with the personal destiny of our neighbor, and is therefore concerned primarily with his soul.

But the essential meaning of the natural orders is also love. Thus they must be redeemed. While we recognize in them indications of God's will for community, we must also see them as they actually are: "instruments of an evil, violent, collective egotism, instruments of tyranny, by means of which the collective body holds the individual in bondage, and degrades him to be the mere instrument of egoistic collective ends."<sup>3</sup> Thus they become idols, instruments of resistance to God's reign. Therefore the sinful orders, or more accurately, the sinful perversions of the orders, should be radically

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<sup>1</sup> "In Brunner's theology these (ordinances or orders) are of two kinds, ordinances of creation and ordinances of conservation. Ordinances of creation are part of the original plan of creation; marriage is an instance. Orders of conservation have been introduced by God to keep the fallen world from complete disintegration; they are, as it were, an afterthought in the divine plan. The State is an order of conservation." (Translator's note in Brunner's God and Man, p. 94.) Cf. also Chap. VII in Christian Faith and the Modern State by Nils Ehrenstrom (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1937).

<sup>2</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 215. <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 217.



criticized and resisted by the believer.

Although these natural orders (except the church which is a Divine and a natural order) were not created by the love that flows from faith, but by the "natural psycho-physical powers of men" it is God's will that they should exist and that their meaning should be not community by compulsion, but through love. The Christian ethic should create an understanding of these natural orders in the light of the Divine Will, perceived by faith. The natural orders do not reveal that God's will is community of love, but revelation in Jesus Christ of God as Creator and Redeemer illuminates the hidden meaning of the natural orders. Therefore, as stated early in this paper, the unique and special revelation really constitutes the meaning of the general.

But it is not enough to create an understanding of the meaning of the natural orders, we must seek their redemption. But again not in self-righteousness, nor in dogmatic programmes of action. All of us must live within the orders, and all of us share the sin that inheres therein. Also, because of the nature of the Divine Command, there can be no Christian social programme--yet we must seek for one-- seek for a better order in every fresh historical situation. We can not lay down laws, nor concrete programmes which are Christian, but we can determine suggestive principles which can furnish guidance.

Our service through the orders is that which is performed through our "office." And here we perceive how our service is related to the three-fold law. The first phase of the law is the Lex, the legal morality of the community. This is made up of the rules governing



action in relation to the orders. Therefore, inasmuch as the Christian is to obey these laws and work within the orders according to their rules, he serves in the capacity of his "office." The orders have a certain degree of autonomy, and the rules governing their proper workings must be obeyed. The judge, for instance, must act in the capacity of a judge and in keeping with legal procedure when he is sitting on the bench. He must judge each case by legal procedure, not on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount or the command to love his neighbor. His first task is to preserve the order of Law, which God has ordained to keep human society from chaos and to force it into measure of community. This obligation to act in the capacity of one's "office" is a part of one's Calling. Everyone has an "official" duty to respect and preserve these orders which are "the only means by which those final consequences of sin can be kept at bay,"<sup>1</sup> i.e., the consequences of disorganization and chaos.

This of course causes tragic conflict, for cooperation with the orders often does not harmonize with the commandment of love, for the logic of the orders is that of human rationality (which is sinful), while that of faith is love. But this tragic sense of conflict must be patiently borne, for love requires that first of all we do cooperate in the orders to prevent chaos from swallowing up all human life. "Therefore the first (although not the highest) duty of the Christian is his 'official duty,'"<sup>2</sup> though it appears only as very indirectly being in accordance with the commandment to love one's neighbor, or even at variance with that commandment. One may even

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 224.



have to use violence, "even to the point of taking human life," in order to preserve the orders. However harsh this may seem, our "office," our "official duty" requires that we do what is necessary to preserve the orders, and what is necessary is determined by reason --human reason, which God uses for this purpose, sinful though it be. But even here, in the use of reason, although faith is not constitutive, it is regulative.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Divine Command, the event of revelation in Jesus Christ, does not tell us what to do in preserving the orders, in maintaining the human social order. The social sciences tell us that. The human reason is the constitutive element. Faith is only regulative.<sup>2</sup> Through it the spirit of love will permeate even our "official duty" and give it meaning. As difficult as it may seem, "I must behave differently to my neighbor in my capacity as a judge, a policeman, a bank official, a schoolmaster, etc., from the way in which I would behave towards him in a 'private' relationship--as man to man. But consideration for the nation as a whole, or which my neighbor also is a member requires this distinction."<sup>3</sup>

But this conservative activity in one's "office" is not the specifically Christian element in life. The Christian should understand both the "need for these orders, and their meaning" better than anyone else.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Does this not deny that the special revelation constitutes the truth of the general revelation? It appears that Brunner abandons his first position.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 225.



In these orders he sees the discipline of God for us sinful men, and at the same time he sees in them sin itself. He sees, too, how God uses human sin to work against sin; and in the fact that these necessary orders are so very different from life controlled by love he sees his own sin and the sin of humanity. This perception leads him to repentance.<sup>1</sup>

That is, by faith the believer perceives the true meaning of the orders, God's will to a community of love. The absolute law thus revealed brings the believer to penitence. He sees the terrible evil of the orders as they are. Thus the believer can never be merely an upholder of the present order. Since the true meaning of the orders as created by God is community of love, "the commandment of love, taken as a law--the requirements of the Sermon on the Mount regarded as a law--is and remains the guiding standard even for life within the orders."<sup>2</sup> Although the requirements of the Sermon on the Mount cannot be applied to life in the orders--sinful as they now are, yet it judges that life, and reveals the terrible contrast between it and the life of love. It is impossible to escape this contrast. We must live in the orders; we must share their sin; we are obliged to participate in evil. The absolute law of the Sermon on the Mount thus leads to repentance, and we are forced to trust utterly in God, and rely upon his grace. Only then can we escape legalism, and pray rightly for the coming of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom which is His gift rather than our achievement.

Inasmuch as most of our activity in relation to others is in some "official" capacity, as father, teacher, judge, etc., it would appear that most of our conduct is only indirectly related to the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 227.



Divine Command, which deals directly with personal relationships. But this is not true, for even within the orders our relationships are not purely "official." Apart from our "office" we also have something to say or to give to the persons with whom we deal. It is in these "personal dealings between individuals, that faith has its distinctive opportunity."<sup>1</sup> The Command of Love puts life into the shell which the "office" provides. In the "sphere" of personal relations the requirements of the Sermon on the Mount, as law, are valid.<sup>2</sup> But actually there is no sphere which is free from the claims of the orders. Always we stand before both claims: the claims of the concrete orders and the claims of the absolute law of love. In the light of both these claims the believer must listen for the Divine Command--"the concrete Command of God Himself."<sup>3</sup>

Another word needs to be said regarding the reforming of the orders. We are not called to do this as individuals, points out Brunner, but each person's "work of reform is determined by his 'class and calling,' that is, by his actual position within the nation to which he belongs."<sup>4</sup> Reform is collective action, and must consider the problem of practical possibility. A reform programme cannot be Christian, for it must be a movement within the sinful orders. Yet the Christian will work for reform, and side by side with unbelievers who also desire greater justice. The Christian should help initiate reform, but the new order is a product of human reason, and is only indirectly the concern of the obedience of faith. But being indirect it is no less a vital concern of the believer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Just as faith must prove its reality by searching for opportunities in which love can have free play, within the limits imposed by the official order, so also faith must prove its reality by searching for ways of making this official order itself more just, more humane, more full of the spirit of love, without unfitting it for the purpose for which it exists as an order.<sup>1</sup>

"The believer's most important duty, however, always remains that of pouring the vitality of love into the necessarily rigid forms of the order."<sup>2</sup> This vitality--this new wine--may burst the old forms, the old wine skins, and bring improvement more rapidly than an emphasis on mere external change. The maintenance of personal relationships of love is the first duty of the believer.

One further consideration which is a presupposition of the believer's apprehension of God's Command should receive our attention, and that is the subject of ends and means. It has been claimed by some that the Barthian ethic aims only at demonstrative action, rather than at effective action. At least for Brunner, this is not true. Demonstrative action is that type which aims at what we might call human revelation, i.e., action on the part of one person which attempts to reveal to another person the love which is felt for him. It uses whatever physical means are necessary in order to demonstrate this personal relation of soul with soul. It is not interested in changing the physical reality as such for the inherent good of such a change. Effective action, on the other hand, does not aim at merely showing the other person that one loves him, wants communion with him in love, but it wants to "do something" for him, "for love."<sup>3</sup> Effective action does not merely seek to establish communication of spiritual love,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 233.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 233.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 237.



but because it loves it really attempts to do something for the other person--to help him. It therefore aims at successful action in the realm of his physical and mental life, including his environment. Obviously action can be both of these, but it is clear that some action may be successful in its demonstrative aspect, and a failure in its effective aspect, or vice versa. Now Brunner holds that we are created in such a manner that our inward and outward aspects of life are co-ordinated. The outward is not merely to show the inward life, but is in itself given by the Creator and is an essential part of our humanity, of our life. This outward aspect of human life includes not merely the body of the individual, but also the "original social forms of our human existence,"<sup>1</sup> i.e., the orders. The Creator has given us the union of the inner and the outer and provides immensely varied possibilities for demonstrative and effective action. Our whole historical inheritance provides a rich store of intellectual "goods" which enables us to act in a wide sphere. In this inheritance we find a richly developed and varied system of means and ends, apart from which we cannot act at all, but in which God has placed us so we can act. The Incarnation of God Himself took place as an historical event. His Word is uttered through real external action. Here is the complete union of the demonstrative and effective aspects of action, for here is revelation and redemption. Here the ultimate End, the Kingdom of God, is both revealed and created (though not completely created). Through faith we receive this Word and this ultimate end. Through us God will complete his creative action. God uses human and historical

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 238.



means to fulfil his Divine Will, even though the fulfillment is very fragmentary and indirect, "cutting right across the continuity of history."<sup>1</sup> Jesus Christ reveals that human nature, as created by God, is potentially able to do what God Commands; that is, "to love: both by showing the spirit of love, and by expressing it in effective action."<sup>2</sup> However, this success is not visible, but hidden; and is the possibility of faith alone.

The Command received in faith requires us to believe, in spite of our sinful nature, that God can, through us, successfully demonstrate his love and do effective works of love in the service of our neighbor. God can thus use the relative means which are apprehensible in the historical environment through faith, to serve His Kingdom. "We are to determine our aims in accordance with the Divine End, and we are to choose the means in accordance with these ends for their successful realization."<sup>3</sup> Thus the concept of teleology plays a part in Brunner's system. Although the Christian ethical system cannot be a legalistic one derived from the teleological consideration, yet we are to set up our aims, our relative ends, in the light of God's purpose. We are to select those means which can be successful in the given life of the orders. In this selection of means man's rational nature is the constitutive factor, while faith is only regulative.

This can never be merely mental activity, but the gift of God demands overt action. Of course this action will be sinful, but when done in obedience to the Divine Command, God covers the sin and sanctifies the action through relating it to His purpose. We must work

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 243.



in the world and adapt ourselves to its means and ends, trusting in God's justification. Through faith His grace sanctifies our relative means and ends. This is the only way we can act at all, for we cannot act in a vacuum, we must act within the existing orders.

After having said this, Brunner hastens on to point out that the believer is free and even under obligation to select or devise new ends in light of the One End, and new means by which they may be realized. In other words, the believer is not obliged to accept the means of war as the way of maintaining international order merely because this is the present means used by the present system of orders.

Brunner furthermore recognizes that not only does the end definitely limit the selection of means which can be successfully used, but that the means used determine to some extent the end achieved. Means are not neutral. Means which destroy our witness cannot be used. Faith thus is aware of the "imponderables" which the practical politician may overlook. And, on the other hand, the believer is not free to devise ends solely in view of the Divine End, but must recognize that the ends he chooses are conditioned by the present system of means. In other words, the believer must be practical. We must recognize that we are compelled to work with sinful material, but we are not to compromise, but rather to recognize that we are justified by faith, and that our action is hallowed by its being within the action of God. However, we cannot rely upon this justification by God unless we have done all in our power to make our ends and means conform to the Divine End, i.e. to Love. Sometimes the means may be so evil, such as modern war, that it is our duty to renounce them altogether.



This brings us to the question as to what norm we can use to decide whether to conform to the accepted means and ends, or whether to oppose them. First of all we can say that we will support those means and ends which preserve the greatest values in our social order, i.e. we will support those means and ends which meet the definite physical and spiritual needs of man in this actual world. We are commanded to take part in the creation and distribution of goods, for through this God wills to maintain the life of our neighbours. This is our "calling" and our duty in our "office." Because God uses the natural orders and the historical means and ends to bind men together in natural forms of community, we are called to support them. The Christian business man must use the means and ends of business in order to share in carrying on this activity of production and distribution, accepting God's forgiveness for having accepted that which he cannot alter.

But when these ends and means in the present sinful orders become so evil that they thwart the purpose for which God created them, namely, community, then the believer is obliged to oppose them, even though it means that in the light of the ordinary morality, his action is now without success.

In relation to the choice of vocation, Brunner suggests three pointed questions which the believer should ask:<sup>1</sup>

- (a) Are the goods which are produced real goods?
- (b) Will they really be distributed to those who need them?
- (c) Are all the goods produced which are required?

In answering this last question Brunner suggests the great need

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 256



for more production of the "Highest Good," i.e. proclamation of the Kingdom of God which is the highest form of demonstrative action. And also he indicates a "higher" task than the simple cooperation of the believer in maintaining the orders is always present, namely, "the free devising of means and ends, in 'works of love.'"<sup>1</sup>

From this point of view it becomes clear that the Divine Command does three things: it requires "cooperation with secular society in accordance with practical righteousness; secondly, it exercises the critical function of the absolute law, or the prophetic criticism of society; thirdly, it guides the extra-ordinary action of the Church in preaching and in philanthropy."<sup>2</sup>

It is in this third area of action that positive social action looking toward the actual creation of the new order lies. The believer, as a member of the Church, should also show that being a Christian means something in his citizenship. Brunner suggests that faith can do three things through its laymen and their lay action in addition to the first two major points listed above. (1) Faith enters into the creation of the intellectual presuppositions necessary for social development. Christian laymen who are experts in their fields (education, law, marriage, etc.) should formulate statements showing "the real significance of faith or unbelief in all the various spheres of social life."<sup>3</sup> (2) These ideas should be propagated as widely as possible. (3) When and if the time is ripe, Christians, as citizens, should take political action.

But the witness is more important than actual success in this

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 273.



field. The little reforms which may be actually achieved at any time are not fundamental. Fundamental and far reaching changes in the structure of society come about only after the system of values which underlie the present order is changed. "The really shattering changes of the social structure take place as changes in the system of values, which, for its part, depends on faith and unbelief."<sup>1</sup> Therefore the most realistic form of action looking toward a new social order is still the proclamation of the Word of God which alone is able to radically re-value the values of men.

But the life of faith which God's act creates is not merely a sentimental or emotional life. God wants both our hands and our hearts--he wants our actual obedience. The life of faith is a new way of life in which both practical service and proclamation takes place. "This kind of action is also controlled by 'law,' but it is not the general law of righteousness, but the particular law of faith and love, which therefore can never really act as law, but only as a guiding principle."<sup>2</sup> On this basis the Creeds, Church Discipline, and Church order, and the social work of the Church become guidance for action.

The real sphere of work for the Christian, however, is in the realm of personal relations. We are not to ignore our duty in our "office," and even that is judged by the Sermon on the Mount, but the sphere of its direct application is in personal relations, and the most important thing there is not doing something for love (effective action), but showing love (demonstrative action). The inner disposition is the most important thing--the will for unlimited fellowship and unlimited

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 276.



forgiveness, which is the Will of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Brunner therefore comes close to Barth in maintaining the primacy of demonstrative action. Effective action aims at success; but demonstrative action seeks not success, but to witness and impart revelation.

We have been discussing the question, "What is Commanded?" Let us attempt a brief summary before proceeding to our next subject. We have seen that the Command--though unpredictable and in its ultimate reality as an event coming in the concrete situation, a mystery--is, in its "penultimate" reality, discernable and knowable. First we pointed out that the nature of the Command would be in keeping with the nature of God's activity as Creator and Redeemer, and therefore in its variety would always possess a certain unity. We have pointed out that the Command implies the virtues. We have shown that the Law interpreted as Lex, as absolute standard which judges, and as a guide for personal action, is a presupposition of the Divine Command. We have discussed the requirement of service, both as a personal "calling" and as our "office." In the doctrine of the "orders" we have seen that God's Will is concealed within these divinely appointed orders, and through faith can be perceived therein; and how the conflict between love as a personal relation and as a duty in maintaining the orders is to be patiently borne while the one thing which is to be done is revealed in the concrete situation. We also have seen that the selection of means and ends enters into the situation as a "penultimate" factor in the Command.

In general, there are two main spheres of conduct for the



believer, which, however, are inter-related. The first task of the believer is to share in the preservation of order and in the prevention of chaos. He is to adapt himself to the present world, thus being realistic, yet he is to oppose it when the orders become so sinful that chaos is brought on, and seek a new world. It is in this realm of "official duty" that man's rational human nature is the constitutive factor, faith being only regulative. Here, in his "office," which is part of the believer's "calling" his action will be mainly "effective." The second requirement or task to which the believer is also "called" is the more specifically Christian task; namely, to reveal unlimited love and forgiveness in the creation of community of personal relations with one's neighbors. Here faith is the constitutive factor, and the rational nature is regulative. This type of action is largely "demonstrative."

Precisely what we are to do in any given situation is revealed to us by God in that situation. The elements entering into that event, it appears to the writer, are: (1) The requirements of the orders in the light of God's action as Creator and Redeemer. (2) The absolute law of the Bible, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, which cannot be applied to life in the orders, but which judges action therein, and creates repentance which makes faith in the believer possible. (3) The concrete situation and the concrete human needs perceived therein. (4) The selection of means and ends in the light of the One Divine End, the Kingdom of God. (5) Knowledge of the Biblical Witness which is a presupposition of the event of revelation. (6) The action of the Holy Spirit, through which the decisive factor enters the situation and the event occurs in which God addresses the believer and



reveals His will. Through this action, God's love is given to the believer, and he is enabled to love his neighbor and perceive God's Command in the actual situation. Both man's rational nature and faith enter into the apprehension of God's Command.

If this is an accurate summation of Brunner's thought on the subject of the Command, it is very acceptable to the writer, except for some obscurity as to the last point. Concerning the possibility of actual unambiguous guidance through the Holy Spirit, Brunner holds to the same position as that of the Oxford Group.<sup>1</sup> To many Christians the idea that God clearly shows the one and the only thing which the believer is commanded to do in every concrete situation is highly questionable.

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<sup>1</sup>

Cf. The Church and the Oxford Group, pp. 79-88.



## CHAPTER III

### PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

In dealing with the practical social problems which we face in our life within the orders, Brunner admits that the Command, as such, really has nothing to say, but only the Command found in the orders has a concrete word. This is perfectly consistent with his doctrine of the "orders", but not quite consistent with his doctrine of the Holy Spirit which he insisted actually does tell us the one thing that we should do. These two factors are always present in Brunner's treatment, not quite in a dialectical relationship, but as two different realities whose relationship is not clearly presented.

In relation to our life in the orders--which includes practically all our conscious life--the doctrine of the orders is the basic theological foundation of ethics. In all these problems our rational nature is the constitutive factor, and love is only regulative. The basis for social ethics is not so much the unique revelation in Jesus Christ, as it is the Divine Order of Creation. Nils Ehrenstrom points out that for Brunner the standard of Christian judgment on society is the divine meaning of the orders, "as it discloses itself in listening to the Word of God concerning man and the world." Thence comes the possibility of a concrete ethic of the social order which illuminates the constant flow of the common life, its institutions and its movements in the light of the ordering will of God. From this point of view, then, it becomes possible to distinguish between that which is relatively better or worse in political or economic organization, in the moral and cultural life of society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ehrenstrom, op. cit., pp. 86-87.



Obviously, unless the "orders" are divinely given, then his discussion of social problems is without religious significance or foundation.

As we have said, the first thing that the believer must do, in connection with his life in the orders, i.e., in his "office," is to preserve the orders, and only when they are so corrupt they fail in their divine purpose of preventing chaos are they to be opposed. Of course, personal relations are also a reality in this life within the orders, and here each man is given the Divine Command in each situation, and cannot be told by others what he should do. The Sermon on the Mount is relevant to the personal relations, but is not an applicable law in relation to the orders. Of course the believer constantly tries to break through the impersonal duties of his "office" and enter into truly personal relations of Christian love even while he is doing his duty in the orders.

And Brunner does not deny the possibility of growth in love. Inasmuch as true love and community is a gift, imparted by God in His revelation, it cannot be something continuous and permanent, it is an event; "but it is certainly of the essence of the life of faith, that this love, like faith itself, should penetrate life more and more--that life which still, however, remains the life of a sinful human being."<sup>1</sup>

In order to love most fully the believer must engage in religious and moral disciplines. Brunner recognizes this, but gives it very brief consideration, for it is of secondary importance when one holds that the Good life is a spontaneous fruit of the Spirit which is given to God's elect. Individual Bible study, meditation, and

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 307.



prayer are acknowledged, not as means of serving God, of course, but as ways through which God can speak to us. All action in solitude, such as sexual self-discipline and education is in its right place only when it is to prepare the self for service in establishing true community. Self-examination, when it is for this purpose of preparation for true community, is also good.

Pure love, and thus absolute community, is impossible because of sin. Love is life itself without sin, and is thus the "eschatological possibility," which is not at our disposal. We cannot speak of it or make rules about it. But we can speak of certain elements that are relative to community in the more abstract environment. We can speak of life in the orders. We shall come to this presently. First, let us briefly consider his description of "Life in Love." Love as a truly personal relationship between the "I" and a "thou" establishes community of feeling, knowing, and willing. (1) Community of feeling is established by the genuine sympathy of him who loves. By a sort of intuitive identification with the "other's" feelings, community is created. (2) By being able to listen as well as to share knowledge, community is created in this area. Truthfulness is a necessity here; yet even it is subordinate to the command to love. However, hardly one case in a thousand will failure to tell the truth be required by love. (3) Community of willing comes when the one who loves refuses to force his will upon another, and even--at least at first--refuses to resist the evil will of the other. Perhaps after the "I" and the "thou" are brought together the evil will may be restrained or adjustment sought. It is in this connection that the irrational and



and unconditioned element in love shows up. Love renounces her own security, not setting her will against the other.

But if the claims of the "other" conflict with the claims of still another person with whom the "I" has personal relations, then how can the conflict be solved? When this happens--when another "thou" has claims that conflict with those that this one has upon me, then I am in society, and out of the realm of purely personal relations. Actually we are always in society, in the realm of the orders. There is no simple life of love. We must act in our capacity of "office" as well as attempt to keep personal relations of true community.

Therefore our practical problems are largely those within the natural orders, where human rationality is the constitutive element in the decision. The natural forms of community which Brunner discusses are: marriage and the family, the economic order, the state, culture, education, art, science, and finally the Church, i.e., the visible humanly organized Church. What is the Divine Will in relation to life in these natural orders, as perceived by faith? To faith these orders are means of service, as well as an education for true community. Work in the divinely given orders is thus God's work, and for the believer, service in the orders is service in the Kingdom of God. But inasmuch as the orders are also distorted by sin, the believer's attitude must be "a watchful, aggressive, determined attitude of hostility to all that is contrary to the will of God within human life"<sup>1</sup> coupled with an attitude of grateful acceptance and a willingness to serve wherever one may be. The Divine Command can not be apprehended in a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 338.



life detached from the orders. Only in actual life within the "framework of orders" can God's will be known. No laws can be given to show how these two attitudes are combined. What to do can be known only in the concrete situation. Only suggestions can be offered as preparation for decision in the actual situation.

### Marriage and the Family

Monogamy is the ethical marriage relationship, not alone because it is sociologically best, nor because of sex-love, but because it is based on the Divine Order of Creation.

Faith discerns that monogamy is the divine order in two facts:

- (1) That every child is born of a father and a mother--its human existence is bound up with this community, and this community of persons is fundamentally indissoluble. Furthermore, the child needs, as a matter of empirical fact, both maternal care and paternal guidance.
- (2) That human sexual love contains evidence of "monos." To true lovers, the intrusion of a third is intolerable. They want to live alone with each other--and they become more completely one in procreation. In this argument Brunner's rationalism is most obvious. Faith in monogamy is not based upon revelation, but upon rational interpretation of empirical evidence. Brunner might have based his argument upon revelation in Genesis, but he did not.

But to continue with Brunner's treatment of this problem, we note his statement that God created men in this manner so that persons would be bound together in responsibility and thus learn fidelity, i.e., community, which is the meaning of marriage. Through this

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 338.



order of creation God "teaches man to understand the meaning of the personal through the experience of love as an existence in community."<sup>1</sup> It teaches people that they belong to each other. Sex for itself, apart from this union in fidelity, is evil. Marriage on that basis is not truly marriage. And modern marriage is not truly marriage for that reason. There is some sin in all marriage, some infidelity, claims Brunner, of thought, if not of act. "What Jesus has said of the lustful glance . . . . makes every one of us an adulterer."<sup>2</sup> For this reason the absolute command of no divorce, which shows how things ought to be, cannot be literally and legalistically applied, for there is no true marriage. There may be times when the Divine Command of love requires us to break the law, when dissolution of marriage is a duty. Yet the Command cannot be known apart from this law, though it stands above it as it is perceived in the orders. What to do can only be known in the concrete situation in the light of the law and of God's requirement to "meet my neighbor in the spirit of responsible love."<sup>3</sup>

Marriage cannot be based upon natural love, although it must be a part of marriage, but upon fidelity. Fidelity provides the basis of permanence. While divorce may be a moral duty and commanded in some situations, the Christian emphasis should be on the permanence of marriage, though on a non-legalistic basis.

In relation to birth control Brunner recognizes that "sexual intercourse is intended by the Creator not only as a means of procreation, but also as a means for expressing the love of married people

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 355.



for one another,"<sup>1</sup> so he favors it, calling it "responsible motherhood."

The natural vocation of woman is motherhood, yet in an unnatural social life in which women outnumber men, other vocations must be opened. There is a natural difference between men and women, and in the home the husband should be the leader, though he should not grasp at it, while the woman should quietly concede leadership and even encourage it, thinks Brunner. In this one might suggest that Brunner is absolutizing the status of the German family, rather than presenting an ethical concept drawn from the Christian revelation.

Faith sees the deep meaning of marriage as a Divine Gift of love and community in which there is a union of the spiritual and the natural. Faith, which receives God's gift of love and forgiveness, naturally has power to make for greater permanence in marriage.

#### The Economic Order

Work leads a man into community, for his needs can be met adequately only on this basis. Work thus requires ethical decision, and we must listen for the Divine Command here also. Two things are clear: (1) God wills that we should work, that we should use and control the sub-human world. It is his Divine Command: "Make the earth subject unto you." (2) God wills to create community through work, through mutual service. Work "is a God-given 'calling' for the service of our neighbour."<sup>2</sup> Work which does not do this cannot glorify God. Since one's natural calling serves the community and since God calls us to serve the community, "in faith it is possible to regard the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 388.



natural calling as God's call to service."<sup>1</sup>

But along with this rest is also necessary--for man must not be "possessed" by work. The command to observe a day of rest is significant. But it should be a day of freedom--not of observance of puritanical duties. Man also needs play and enjoyment. "Whatever assists our life in community is Good--whether it be 'moderate' or not."<sup>2</sup> But above any statements or rules we can make stands God's Command. He may require renunciation of rest and pleasure in some situations. We cannot set up arbitrary principles and then forget about God, else man will become the slave of his civilization. While we must work to create things, to build a civilization, yet it must not become our obsession, for in the end the mania for things destroys community. The Divine order becomes daemonic and men become slaves to it. Today, civilization has reached this stage--it is daemonic.

God also wills joy in labour. A sense of calling is necessary for this joy. But also men must know that their labor fulfills a purpose in helping men to be truly men and in serving community. Today, a worker as a cog in a machine, easily replaceable, cannot know this and therefore cannot feel his vocation is a divine calling. He does not feel his control over nature nor his service to community. The order of labor has become disorder. This state of disorder and of meaninglessness of work for the laborer is accentuated by unemployment.

The present order is extremely sinful, having become an end in itself and a huge system of human exploitation. It must always be remembered that the task of economic activity is not merely to produce material good which are necessary for the preservation of physical

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 390.



life, but to help preserve human life as a whole. On the other hand it must be remembered that all economic orders are infected by sin, and in whatever one we live we are called to work. God as Creator justifies our work within it, but also as Redeemer He shakes it to its very foundations with his judgment.

The first question for the believer is not how to change the order, but how to serve in it, for a new order may not come in his lifetime. Furthermore the individual can do little to change the situation. Brunner takes a fatalistic view here, but gives it an unusual turn. God, instead of being most anxious to redeem this evil social order, "wills to hammer into us by the very fact of the overwhelming force of the economic world (the truth) that we are living in a 'wicked' world, and that we shall live in it to the end of our days on earth."<sup>1</sup> Brunner calls this "curse" a "Divine reaction against our common, primal historical apostasy from our Creator." If this idea were not counterbalanced by his later discussion, one would think the basis of social action found in the doctrine of God as Redeemer had been lost.

Be that as it may, Brunner claims that God in his kindness enables us to serve even in this order which is really disorder. We can still practice love under the Divine Command. We can still help to maintain human life within the order, breaking through our "official duty" and revealing love, while with other citizens we strive to make the order better, even though we cannot overcome its sinful autonomy and bring it under ethical discipline which, Brunner maintains, would ruin it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 401.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 403.



In regard to property, Brunner holds that private property can neither be denied nor affirmed in the light of the Divine orders. He proposes instead the idea of "property-in-community" as a critically regulative principle. God wills "a mutual relation between the individual and the community, a mutual limitation of the individual and the community."<sup>1</sup> Upon such a regulative principle no Christian economic system or programme can be built. "For we are living in an irrational and sinful economic reality, within which the relative 'best' cannot be deduced from any a priori system."<sup>2</sup> The only standard is the meaning which faith discerns in the orders, i.e., community. Both the individual and the community must make decisions when the actual situations are faced with the guiding principle: "to seek to accord each man his due in the midst of community."<sup>3</sup> Upon the basis of this critical principle, both individualism and communism are rejected by Brunner.

That the economic order is divinely given means we have another critical principle: that everyone must work. There is no justification for unearned incomes (although Brunner does not reject the receiving of interest as being in this category--but is suspicious of it), nor for allowing parasitical living.

Brunner repudiates the "egalitarian idea of equality as a principle of economic justice," but sees also that exploitation and sin have made injustice prevail in the distribution of the rewards of work. The community should protect the weak and procure a balance. But again, this is not a constructive principle on which to erect a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 405.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Christian programme, but a critical principle by which we can judge any system. The community, through law, should secure adjustments for the good of both the community and the individual.

Brunner's analysis of the present capitalistic system is a devastating indictment of it. Its vast evil, he claims, is a manifestation of original sin, in which everyone shares. The three main evils are: (1) indolence, (2) mania for profits and for work, (3) economic egoism.

God has created us for mutual dependence, endowing us with "reciprocal needs and surpluses," which Brunner calls "comparative monopolies." Land, tools, and bodily and mental powers are the major monopolies. To serve the community and the individual best the community must support the weak monopolies and prevent their exploitation by the strong. Just how this can be done can only be discovered in the actual situation.

Economic democracy might prove valuable, thinks Brunner, but he is suspicious of an axiomatic belief in democracy, for it tends toward the rationalistic idea of equality "which denies the Divine order in creation, according to which the human community cannot exist apart from energetic and powerful guidance by individuals."<sup>1</sup> Americans find it difficult to share this fear, and most of them would probably hesitate before accepting Brunner's statement that "love teaches us we must stand for an economic order which will really 'nourish,' whether it be democratic or autocratic." There is a tendency in Brunner

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 414.



to make these orders altogether too autonomous in their respective ends and means. Here he seems to be dividing up man, whereas shortly before he called our attention to the necessity of our service of the whole man. Of course if democracy in economics failed to provide a physical basis for existence, or if it actually bred universal irresponsibility instead of a more general sense of responsibility, it would be inadequate; but Brunner's arguments are unconvincing to this writer's mind. Nor is he quite as certain, as is Brunner, that democracy does not follow necessarily from the Christian conception of brotherhood.

Aside from his suspicions of democracy, Brunner's searching criticism of capitalism is well taken. Its subservience to the profit motive, its individualism, its "soullessness" and depersonalization of relations between owner and worker, its control over the press, education and the Church through its concentration of economic power in the hands of a few, are all denials of community and mark it an unjust and wicked economic dis-order. The laborer becomes a commodity and work loses its dignity. "The real sin of Capitalism against the worker is this," says Brunner: "the sin against the sense of personality, and this means against the sense of community in labor."<sup>1</sup> It denies everything that faith sees to be the meaning of true economic order. In it "it is almost impossible for the individual to realize, in any way, through his economic activity, the service of God and of his neighbor."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless Brunner maintains that faith can still practice

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 423.



love in this "soulless" order. We can still have a sense of "vocation," for this bad system does still actually maintain our lives and the lives of our neighbours. Therefore, though in this order we are compelled to do unbrotherly acts in our economic "office," we can keep free from the economic spirit, we can keep ourselves above the world and in the spirit of love. On the other hand, we can only accept the order and adjust ourselves to it and ask others to find their vocation in it if we are at the same time committed also to change it. Brunner recognizes all the dangers and difficulties which beset us if we attempt to change the order, but he still insists that "Capitalism is economic anarchy; therefore the Christian is obliged to fight against it, and to fight for a real order."<sup>1</sup>

In seeking a better order Brunner does not believe in attempts to construct a Christian programme, but thinks the new order will be found in the struggle. Therefore we ought to reflect critically on the actual possibilities that are before us, for or against which we may have to decide in the near future. In evaluating the possibilities before us, Brunner rejects communism for its acceptance of rationalistic ideas of equality, for its ideal aim of individualism and lack of community (anarchy), and for its actual dependence on violence to maintain itself after its birth through the use of violence. Marxist socialism or "nationalization" under democracy also are repudiated for they imply "bureaucracy, demagogic, incompetent leadership, and general irresponsibility."<sup>2</sup>

Guild Socialism and the English Socialist Movement, thinks

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 426.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 428.



Brunner, offer the best possibility, for they are derived from a different and a true idea of community--the principle of cooperation. There are problems here also, as to how large cooperatives will get along, how can the system be applied to national and world economy, etc. But Brunner looks in this direction for the "better" order of the immediate future. But even this is not to be taken as a Christian programme, nor a constructive principle, but only as a critical one.

In seeking for a new order one of the fundamental tasks is the creation of a new economic spirit which will be an adequate basis upon which a new order can be built. This is what Marxism did. "This confirms what we have already said, namely, that decisive changes in social conditions always issue from a change in the 'system of values' of the purposive will. It is at this point that the Church is confronted with her important educational and missionary task."<sup>1</sup> The Church, which knows what community really means, should, in cooperation with others of goodwill, propagate a new spirit of mutual responsibility and service.

The Christian as a citizen should work for the better order by political action, strikes, and other group means to achieve ends which he forms in the light of his faith. But a man must not be acquiescent just because he sees some evils even in the group or programme with which he must work, for acquiescence is support of the present anarchy. The Christian citizen must work with secular movements, and fight and sacrifice for his cause--the cause which he is convinced will better society. Other Christians may be in the opposition camp fighting and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 427.



sacrificing also, says Brunner. This indicates how relative even the Christian judgment must be when it comes to actual social problems, which are terrifically complex, and why the Church as such should not ally itself with any particular programme. One might also say that it is a good reason why the Christian should not consider the guidance he receives in relation to such a social problem as the Divine Command.

All the while the Christian is working and sacrificing for the new order he must also live within the present one and bear his share of the burden. As we have said before, he must constantly try to break through his "official duty" as doctor, business man, statesman, etc., and in spite of the inhumanity within the system, meet his fellow human beings, as far as possible, as brothers. The Sermon on the Mount is the law of life for the believer in these personal relations--as a guide, not as imposing legalistic duties--even though it cannot be applied to his life in his "office." A Christian business man cannot be expected to run his business on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount, but in his own spirit he must be free from greed, pride, and hypocrisy, ready to sacrifice for others. In-so-far as possible he will meet those with whom he has to do business not as objects or things, but as neighbors to whom he owes love. Any wealth he secures will be regarded most seriously, and treated not as his own, but as a stewardship, a means of service. How he uses this money will depend not on his ownership, but upon God's command, for which he must listen. No norm can be set up on how much a man can spend on himself, unless it be that he should use only that amount necessary for him to fulfil his calling. As a critical principle, the Christian should spend on himself



only the amount which maintains his efficiency in his calling, his vocation.

In relation to the economic order Brunner says the Church should do four things: (1) Proclaim the Gospel which will create a new spirit--thus bringing about the necessary re-valuation of values. (2) Serve the community through philanthropy and social service. (3) Exercise prophetic criticism, calling for repentance. Proclamation of the Absolute Kingdom should also be a pointed judgment upon the present situation. This should call the church members to repentance as well as the community. (4) Demonstrate a different spirit in her own membership, showing that the Gospel is not for eternal redemption alone, but is a force for earthly righteousness and constructive social conduct.

#### The State

The State is the created order of God given to sinful man in order to prevent him from destroying himself. "That the Christian affirms the necessity of the state is the correlate of his knowledge of original sin."<sup>1</sup> This is the central point in Brunner's doctrine of the State. The State is an order of preservation, not of creation.

The State is characterized by power, by violent coercion. While it preserves the forms of community, it does so by this method which is a contradiction of love, yet necessary. Because its basis is power, the State becomes the fullest expression of collective sin. Its fundamental character is might, not right. However, this might is not merely that of physical power, but is blended with psychical and

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<sup>1</sup> Nils Ehrenstrom, Christian Faith and the Modern State, p. 118; quoted from Emil Brunner, Der Staat als Problem der Kirche, p. 12.



spiritual power. It has a certain nouminous background, which Christians also recognize. "Power is given to it by God for the sake of order, community, and law."<sup>1</sup> But this power also becomes the instrument for egoism and opposition to God. The State is the playground of Satanic forces, for in it the lust for power assumes a pseudo-religious sanction.

The power of the State is given by God in order that it might support Law. Law, as recognized by faith, is the God-given meaning of the State. God's intention for the State's power is justice. Justice cannot be perfect, for only love is perfect, but it is a presupposition of love, and preserves order in which alone love can find expression. "Love means going out to others; justice means the delimitation of the spheres of power, and the protection of these boundaries."<sup>2</sup>

Law gives us a sense of reliability and thereby teaches man of God's justice and reliability. The Divine sanction is given to Law as an order of preservation, and thus in preserving Law the State deserves respect.

Law, in order to protect community, must possess coercive power--which is a denial of community; yet it is necessary. Through its support of Law, "the coercive power of the State becomes a moral entity."<sup>3</sup> There is no way of having order and justice in this sinful world except on this basis. "The Law which can be imposed by force is the presupposition for the peaceful cooperation of human beings."<sup>4</sup> This idea leads logically to Brunner's next step which in turn leads

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 447.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 450.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 452.    <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 453.



--if not counterbalanced--to the absolute power of the authoritarian state. He says, "The greater the power of the State, over every individual or group within the State, the more effective is the law. . . . The more that resistance is seen to be hopeless, the more can the use of force remain latent."<sup>1</sup> The assumption here appears to be that because of the sinfulness of man, the really determinative force in human relations for the preservation of order is fear. From this point of view any international order (which Brunner thinks we must seek) will have to rely upon a supreme military power, against which no State will dare rise. This raises a fundamental question: can there be order on any other basis than violence and fear? And this rests back on theology. Is man and society depraved, or are there social forces of a more creative type in human life that are able to provide a sufficient basis for order. Brunner thinks not, for to him, law is not an expression of the basic unity and harmony among persons, but it is "an expression of broken unity, a restraining barrier between conflicting ends and purposes,"<sup>2</sup> and evidently solely that. As Dr. John C. Bennett points out, "There is a curious blind spot in Brunner in his being unable to see law as a positive means of cooperation for mutual good."<sup>3</sup>

In relation to other autonomous forms of community, the State is to provide the necessary framework within which they can operate, but it is not supposed to control and dominate them. This appears to

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrenstrom, Christian Faith and the Modern State, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> This quotation from Professor Bennett is a personal comment made by him to the writer.



be a contradiction of his former insistence that the State must have power over every individual and group to make law effective. Be that as it may, Brunner insists that the family, economics, and culture are orders created by God previous to the State, and have relative aims of their own independent of the State. Here, therefore, he repudiates the totalitarian idea of the State, and declares the Christian ethic should withstand the totalitarian idea and movement. These other orders should not be subservient to the State. "It is not the duty of the State itself to engage in economic activity, or to establish marriage, or to carry on scientific work, or the work of education. All that it ought to do or may do, is to make a place for the autonomous life of these institutions."<sup>1</sup> God has created these orders for autonomous action--not as subservient to the State, to increase its powers.

Like the economic order, the State is to be accepted, and action within it regarded as part of our calling, even while we oppose its unwarranted expansion.<sup>2</sup> The Sermon on the Mount cannot be its governing norm, for it must have power, power other than love, in order to keep order and serve the welfare of the people. The moral standard for judgment of State action is whether it ministers to the successful fulfillment of life in the other orders. It has an interest in the other orders, not to make them subservient to its own ends, but to enable them and encourage them to fulfil their respective tasks in creating community and in serving the welfare of the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 458.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrenstrom agrees with Brunner in pointing out the necessity of Christian citizens limiting the political authority of the State to its proper sphere. Cf. CFMS, pp. 142-3.



In this sense the State stands under God's Command, and if it breaks God's laws it will not go unpunished.

As to the form of the State, monarch, democracy, etc., Brunner says there are no a priori principles upon which we can say any one is better than any other. We can only say that that form is best which in the particular situation most effectively realizes the purpose of the State, i.e., to maintain order and create community. Therefore both competence (efficiency) and formation of bonds of unity among the people are important standards. Therefore, thinks Brunner, neither complete autocracy nor democracy are as a rule best.

In discussing the relation of the Christian to the use of force, Brunner repudiates absolute Pacifism as anarchical. On such a basis the state could not exist at all. On the other hand he recognizes that although in the past war was justified in that it preserved the welfare of a people from aggression, modern warfare has become so destructive of the life of all the orders, that a Christian might well refuse to support it in any way. "Objective interest in the abolition of war is today greater than all national interests, however justifiable."<sup>1</sup> There must be a further development of international law and a unification of the nations. Brunner even suggests the possibility of unilateral disarmament as a valid experiment toward ending war. He admits that we don't know in what direction to move, but says, "if a nation were to disarm, and render itself 'defenceless'--in the old sense of the word--in order to prepare the way for the new form of 'security' such action would not be the sign of political folly but of

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 472.



political wisdom, since it would demonstrate the possibility of a new way of political action."<sup>1</sup> Whether in the present situation Brunner still holds to this position is questionable. But whatever may be his present opinion on this matter, one criticism should be made. Brunner made no mention of the relationship of capitalism and war. In fact he made no analysis of the causes of war at all--apparently supposing that Christians will all recognize that it is "original sin" which can be held in check only by international law and force.

As to revolution, Brunner is very cautious. There is no basis upon which to argue the right of revolution, but possibly God may use revolution to destroy a hopeless order. But since the State is God-given, this always runs the risk of being violent defiance of God. Brunner says, "Only unavoidable necessity will avail to protect this action (revolution) from the reproach of rebellion against God."<sup>2</sup> One wonders just what "unavoidable necessity" is. When is a state so bad it must be destroyed by revolution? Only the Command of God can guide us. But the command to love is only a regulative principle in these problems within the orders, so we should not expect a criteria to be found therein. What criteria do we have by which we could validate our perception of that which is "necessary?"

In relation to the penal law, Brunner thinks more effort should be made to redeem the law-breaker. He does not, however, think fear of punishment as a restraint is invalid. On the other hand, his main thesis is that penalty should be expiation. This can cover other motives, he admits, but maintains that basically the idea of expiation

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 474.



is sound. Even the criminal, who still possesses moral sense, wants to make some kind of expiation. Penalty on this basis is sound. In the light of faith the Divine Command is connected with rewards and punishments. It is part of the will of God, and earthly law is a figurative representation of it. Brunner obviously, therefore, does not believe our human practices have given us our concept of God as judge, but the reality of God as judge is reflected in human law.

The idea of expiation keeps the sense of justice sharp, and this is necessary to preserve life in the sinful world. It keeps law from being merely a secular affair, and enables us to see God's will in it. However it must not be an expression of primitive revenge or Pharisaism. Society is always the chief criminal. But also the criminal must recognize his responsibility. Both society and the individual must share in the expiation. "Society must expiate her wrongdoing by trying to compensate, so far as this is still possible, for what has been left undone for the man who has become guilty."<sup>1</sup> This, it appears to the writer, is to consist in a forcible "educative punishment" which the criminal in his turn must accept. As an aside, it appears further to the writer that this is letting society--the chief criminal--off very easily, and that no forcible educative punishment can really be society's share in expiation. But to continue with Brunner's thought we find him repudiating capital punishment because in it society offers no expiation. However, the right of the State to take life, he claims, remains. In regard to criminology, all that Brunner is suggesting has been suggested by modern sociologists.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 477.



His contribution is to undergird the sociological demand with a theological doctrine of expiation.

Concluding his section on the State, Brunner comes back to his social pessimism, which results from his doctrine of Original Sin, and incidentally shows how little divine guidance there is for life in the orders. A Christian, he says, may be a Fascist or a Bolshevik or anything else in his practical political action.<sup>1</sup> All programmes are sinful anyway, and hopelessly relative. The important thing is "in what spirit we take this line of action, the shame and sorrow we feel in being obliged to follow this line."<sup>2</sup> After all, this shows that Brunner's doctrine of the Divine Orders doesn't give us much actual ethical guidance. Brunner suggests no techniques nor disciplines by which we could make our rational judgments valid to the highest degree--and it is these rational judgment which determine largely what we shall do in relation to social problems.

On the basis that whatever we do is sinful, Brunner says, "Therefore to live as a Christian in the State means above all to hope for the new world which lies beyond history."<sup>3</sup> The hope for the new world keeps the Christian from becoming hard and callous and also (for some reason which is not clear to the writer) "prevents him from lapsing into irresponsibility out of fear of becoming hard. Both his joyful readiness for service and his sanity in service spring from this hope. And those two words sum up the whole political ethics of the Christian."<sup>4</sup>

We have presented Brunner's treatment of three major social

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 481.    <sup>2</sup> Ibid.    <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 482.    <sup>4</sup> Ibid.



problems. His treatment of culture, art, science, and education follows consistently, as have these, his theology of the orders. Before we now turn to some criticisms of his position, it is well to note how vividly he has brought out the problems in the three areas of change in contemporary Christian social thought. The first change is that of the place given to the teachings of Jesus. We have seen how Brunner's treatment of social problems is not derived from the teachings of Jesus, but from his theology. The second change in Christian social thought is that of the appearance of another social expectation. Optimism as to social progress has been replaced by pessimism. The Kingdom of God, as we have seen, is for Brunner beyond history. All social change is precarious, and no programme is Christian--all are infected with sin. The third change is related to this. Christians are being more cautious in identifying the Church with any particular social program. Brunner likewise holds that the Church must not identify itself with any secular movement, for all are relative and sin-infected. Christians as citizens, however, are to take active part in secular movements, and strive for a better world.



## CHAPTER IV

### CRITICISMS AND COMPARISONS

#### From the Point of View of Barth

Inasmuch as Brunner is ranked as a Barthian, and his work cited by some as evidence that the Barthian theology can have a concrete ethic, it is natural that we should first turn to a consideration of the difference between these two positions.

First of all, I think we must admit that when it comes to Brunner's actual treatment of concrete social problems, he has abandoned the Command as the basis of his ethics. His ethic is not based upon the unique revelation in Jesus Christ. Although he valiantly upheld this as the basis of the Christian ethic, which is essentially an ethic of personal relations, he was forced to abandon it when he came to discuss actual ethical problems, which he himself had to admit were never purely personal, but always related to life in the orders. In the orders the Command of Love is no longer constitutive, but only regulative.

Barth rejects any general revelation through the orders. As Paul Tillich pointed out, Barth "does not believe that one can derive from the teaching about creation divine decrees, as a divinely ordered form of nature and of man and society."<sup>1</sup> He believes that even if there were such orders they too would have been so radically transformed

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<sup>1</sup> Tillich, op. cit.



by sin that they could not provide us guidance. Barth decidedly does not believe that the Command of God can be discerned in the orders, but only in the event of revelation itself when God speaks to a man in the concrete situation--and for him that speaking is not through the orders but actual and real through His Word as witnessed in the Scriptures. The form in which God speaks is the Bible. The Holy Spirit guides or acts in making the Bible now and then speak--and it is directly God's Word when it does speak to our spirit. The Spirit cannot reveal anything beyond Biblical revelation, but through the use of the Orders Brunner attempts to get more than this.

Revelation, if it is revelation in the Barthian sense, which Brunner apparently holds also, is something absolute and ultimate, and therefore not open to testing by anything else whatsoever except revelation. I think Brunner has gone beyond this concept of revelation and should clarify his position more carefully. He is misleading in his use of the Divine Command. At one time this refers to the unique revelation. At another it refers to the will of God as discerned in the orders. Now these two realities are not the same, and the use of the same terminology to describe one experience which is supposed to be of an absolute nature, and another which certainly is an experience of a relative, is misleading in the extreme. If ethics are to be based upon the Divine Command as event and actual revelation, then Brunner has gone too far in basing it upon the Divine Orders and calling it still the Divine Command.

Brunner's guiding principle in judging social problems is the idea of community--which never has existed, nor ever will. This he



says is the revealed meaning of the orders. But here he is giving ethical content to the revelation which is an idea, while he himself has insisted that what God gave in His revelation in Jesus Christ was not an idea, but Himself. From the point of view of Barth, Brunner is unwarranted in his ethical system as one based upon the unique revelation in Christ. By calling that which comes to a man through the orders a Divine Command Brunner is absolutizing a relative.

It appears to me that Brunner's position is better than Barth's, but Barth is right in holding that it abandons the crisis theology and the doctrine of the "wholly-otherness" of God. If God's command, which is only given in the act where God gives Himself, is to be perceived in the orders, then obviously God is not wholly other. Also, inasmuch as Barthians are supposed to take all their doctrine from Scripture, Barth has a point, for the doctrine of the orders is not a scriptural doctrine at all. Even Martin Dibelius admits this and says, "No theology of the orders can be derived from these traditions (Old and New Testaments) because they contain no 'message' which could serve as the basis for a doctrine."<sup>1</sup>

Barth considers the doctrine of the orders, with some degree of justification, as a form of natural theology. While Brunner rejects the "two-story" Roman Catholic system, he comes near to bringing it back in having a social ethic based on the necessity of the orders and a personal ethic based on the event of revelation. Barth vehemently rejects Brunner's position saying, "Brunner's natural theology is in conflict with the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, and so is every

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Conference Book, Christian Faith and the Common Life, (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1938), p. 23.



natural theology. Therefore I reject with horror and passion every natural theology."<sup>1</sup> But the main point at issue is the nature of man. Brunner admits that there is in man's fallen nature traces of the divine image, and it is that, in fact, which constitutes him as a human. But Barth holds that man is human, even when the image is totally defaced, and that man does not now have anything of the image of God left in him. Brunner, by holding that man still possesses the formal image of God, thus leaves open the possibility of salvation. Barth is afraid (unduly) that this takes away the absoluteness of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

The whole issue in relation to ethics, however, is that of a general revelation and a doctrine of orders, which Barth rejects.

From the Point of View of H. N. Wieman

Professor Wieman has taken up the cudgel against the Barthian or "neo-supernaturalistic" school of theology from the point of view of naturalistic theism. Unfortunately, as R. L. Calhoun has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> Professor Wieman is not a careful theologian, as indicated by his inclusion of Paul Tillich among the Barthians. However, Professor Wieman does represent an important point of view and it will be profitable to examine his critical analysis of the thought of Emil Brunner as presented in The Divine Imperative. He launches his attack by saying that Brunner's system of ethics is not to be identified with the will of God. "It is," he says, "merely a set of suggestions to indicate what seems in general to be the very best that a Christian can

<sup>1</sup>

R. L. Calhoun, book review of The Growth of Religion, Christian Century, February 1, 1939, p. 152.





do in this evil world, things being as they are. But most emphatically this system of ethics must not be identified with the will of God."<sup>1</sup>

It should be pointed out that Brunner would deny that his volume was the presentation of a system of ethics. Very frankly Brunner admitted that there could be no Christian system of ethics. His volume does not pretend to be a system giving exact guidance for concrete situations, but is a discussion upon which basis one can be prepared for receiving the Divine Command which comes in the concrete situation. Brunner does establish certain critical principles derived from his doctrine of the Orders, but these do not constitute a system. And when he asserts that the Divine Command is to be perceived in the orders he does not indicate that the will of God is limited to what can be perceived therein, but indicates that what the believer apprehends in the orders is a presupposition of receiving the Divine Command in the concrete situation. This, however, is not always clear. Sometimes Brunner does actually indicate that a rationalistic analysis of the orders by one who believes does give a system of ethics, and that as far as these are concerned, there is very little "unpredictable fullness of possibility" of action.

Wieman's criticism of Brunner's arbitrary rejection of secular ethics is well taken, particularly when one realizes how very small is the difference between the final results of many secular ethical systems and Brunner's own discussion of social problems. But the more

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<sup>1</sup> H. N. Wieman, "The New Supernaturalism," Christendom, Winter, 1938. Cf. also Wieman's treatment in Section II of The Growth of Religion (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1937), for a more complete criticism and the presentation of his own position.



important thing which Wieman points out is that "when he (Brunner) describes 'secular ethics' in order to reject them, it is obvious that he is simply casting off the outmoded philosophies of yesterday which almost any modern mind would likewise abandon. What he calls Christian ethics are insights derived from the teachings of modern psychology, the social sciences, and other works of the 'secular' mind of the day, together with selected insights from the past. He does try to translate them into Christian verbiage as much as possible."<sup>1</sup>

The last portion of this quotation is perhaps a little unfair, for it is not an exact description of Brunner's work. In fact, one might with even more accuracy (at least from the viewpoint of historical Christianity) say that Wieman's ethics are naturalistic ones which he tries to translate into "Christian verbiage." Although Brunner admits that the question of what one should do in his "office" is determined by human reason with its insights from psychology, sociology, etc., yet he does not merely present such insights clothed in Christian verbiage. Though the human reason determines what to do, and therefore what is done is relative, there is something more which enters into the decision than merely human reason. In the first place, what one decides to do is partially determined by the meaning he sees in the orders--a meaning revealed to him who has faith. In the second place, and even more important, even though one as a believer must trust to human insights in relation to his "official duty," yet he is always, by his faith, compelled to try to break through into personal relations of love--relations which are not determined by human reason,

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<sup>1</sup> Wieman, op. cit., p. 69.



but by irrational and transcendent love which finds guidance in the "impracticable" law of the Sermon on the Mount. Because these two "spheres" are not separate, even one's "official duty" is never merely that discerned by reason, but also is partially constituted by revelation. The Command to love is not only regulative, but is to some degree constitutive. Brunner's book is not an ethical system, and it represents more than insights selected from the natural and social sciences.

Wieman highly approves of the idea of finding guidance in the actual situation rather than attempting to predetermine action. He has as little use for causistry as does Brunner. However, as has been indicated, he thinks Brunner abandons this. He maintains that it is in the concrete situation, full to overflowing with unforeseen possibilities that God speaks, "and not in Brunner's or any other man's ethic, not even in a 'Christian ethic.'"<sup>1</sup> As far as the dynamic nature of right conduct is concerned, such as Brunner holds in relation to the Divine Command as guidance for personal relations, Wieman highly approves. But he does not approve of Brunner's theological interpretation of why the good is unpredictable. Wieman accepts the statement that God is the source of the good which can be apprehended only in the concrete situation, but he criticizes Brunner's idea of God--and idea which he claims leaves God undefined and outside the world, making him irrational, and thus causing ethics to be removed from the realm of reason. This criticism is partially justified. The difficulty is that Brunner--as we have pointed out before--uses the term "Divine Command"

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<sup>1</sup> Wieman, op. cit., p. 70.



to cover the personal direct guidance of God for man in his personal relations and also to describe that which the believer perceives in the orders to be the will of God. As we have suggested, Brunner thinks the two cannot be separated, except in thought; therefore I suppose he is justified to some extent, yet not wholly so. When we think of the two quite different things as being somehow united, then there is the fact that both the guidance of God as direct personal action in the concrete situation and also the rational understanding of human society enter into every decision. In this way ethics are not removed from reason. It seems to be that the difficulty with Wieman is that he has not adequately perceived the difference between Barth and Brunner, and when Brunner makes such a large place for general revelation in his theology of the orders he has considerably qualified Barth's position that ethics depend wholly upon the miraculous incursion of God into the human scene. If Brunner was maintaining two actual spheres of ethical activity, then Wieman's criticism would be true as far as the first sphere is concerned, which deals with purely personal relations. But inasmuch as Brunner recognizes that there are no purely personal relations, but each man also always acts in his "office," he sees that ethics are never wholly removed from reason. It is only because Wieman does not see this that he is able to say,

When neo-supernaturalism repudiates in the field of religion every rational method for distinguishing between truth and error, between reality and illusion, between good and bad, it opens the gates to every form of bigotry, cruelty and violence. In the last analysis there are only two ways to support any claim against those who do not accept it. One is that of persuasion upon the basis of reason and the data of experience, the other is that of



dogmatism, unreasoning enthusiasm, violence and cruelty.<sup>1</sup>

As pointed out, Brunner has not repudiated every rational method for distinguishing between good and bad in ethics. In the second place, Wieman's "either-or" alternative is unwarranted. One may believe in the supernatural revelation of truth and still not seek to impose it on others by violence and cruelty, but simply proclaim the revelation and depend upon God's action in the human spirit to do the convincing--and this is precisely the method of persuasion of the neo-supernaturalists. Those who rely on reason are just as prone to use violence as those who rely upon revelation as the giver of truth. And those who believe they are commanded to love and forgive are probably less likely to use violence and cruelty than those whose sole criteria is reason. Furthermore it should be said that inasmuch as the neo-supernaturalist finds his ethic tested by the New Testament witness, he is in very little danger of relying upon violent persecution. With these facts in mind I think we can see the fallacy of Wieman's statement that: "In time it will become cruelty and violence in religion if neo-supernaturalism succeeds in upholding the claim that the ultimate reference of religion is rationally irresponsible."<sup>2</sup>

The main point at issue here is the doctrine of God. Wieman is willing to admit the "hidden-ness" of God, i.e., he recognizes that God is largely unknown. He also admits that God is more than the world. God is the "uncomprehended totality of all that is best." But

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 73. Just how Wieman could make this statement after a careful study of The Divine Imperative is more than the writer can understand.



for Wieman God is not discontinuous with the already comprehended "best." By rational and empirical methods man will come to know more and more of this "uncomprehended" reality, just as he already knows something about it. For Wieman there is no "infinite qualitative difference" (a phrase of Kierkegaard's which the Barthian's use) between God and man. I should say that Wieman rather would regard it as an infinite quantitative difference. Needless to say, Wieman also places no reliance upon a unique and special revelation in Jesus Christ. He has no place for revelation in the Barthian sense.

Wieman goes into a rather detailed comparison of Brunner's views and his own, holding that both are attempts to explain the same actual reality, attempting to persuade us, of course, that his interpretation is the more correct. He even comes perilously near creating a discontinuity between God and man himself when he says, "Thus God must always over-rule and re-direct human purpose and desire if the riches o<sup>r</sup> life are to enter the appreciative awareness of men."<sup>1</sup> It is not exactly clear how this act of the "superh-human" God in stepping into man's life and creating the possibility of man's apprehension of himself is any different from the Barthian concept of God's act in which he creates faith in man through which man can receive His revelation.

Of course Wieman claims there is a most important difference. For him, this super-human God is a process of the natural world. He is not a personal being. Therefore he cannot reveal love as a personal

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<sup>1</sup> Wieman and Horton, The Growth of Religion, p. 293.



relation; nor can such a God forgive--in the Christian sense--for forgiveness is also a personal relation. Furthermore, Brunner insists on the need of a Mediator through which alone man can apprehend anything of the true will of this reality, God,--which he believes is personal being. Wieman has no place for a Mediator in this sense. He denies that the reality which we call God is personal, although it apparently has characteristics of personal being.

When Wieman discusses the imperative to action, he does not speak of a super-human over-ruling of man's purpose and desire, but comes back to true immanence and says that the imperative is an inner propulsion to seek abundant life--to respond to the unpredictable fullness of God in concrete situations. This is the libido of life. It may be oppressed and lost in the welter of social demands upon a man, or through his devotion to a partial good. Man must cultivate this inner propulsion--thus striving for the total best.<sup>1</sup> The imperative gives no guidance but to seek the highest values or good in the situation. When we ask what the highest value is, we have the answer: "The process by which the world is made better is the forming of connections of mutual support, mutual control, and mutual facilitation between appreciable activities."<sup>2</sup> This is a bit obscure, but does it differ essentially from Brunner's concept of "community?" And did not Brunner admit that the Divine Command gave not guidance except to love and to seek the goal of community, which love discerned to be the meaning of the orders?

Wieman agrees that what to do in the concrete situation cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 330.



be known beforehand. In order that there might be growth, the individual must experiment. Only "when we know the conditions, the consequences, and the pattern of our action" do we have knowledge of the reality of God--or of what to do. What we do is always uncertain. Upon the basis of what we know, we experiment. But we have no direct guidance as to what is good. Here Wieman is definitely criticizing the idea of direct guidance through revelation. Brunner would admit that what we do in the orders is always uncertain, because of sin and because of dependence upon human rationality. He probably would not link our knowledge of God to these three conditions, but he would admit that as far as our life in the orders is concerned that only "when we know the conditions, the consequences, and the pattern of our action" do we know what to do; for if we are to preserve and redeem the orders we must know these things.

Wieman is more clear and positive in his treatment of the relevance of ideals for ethical living than is Brunner. Brunner does not deny this, for he points out that Christians must sacrifice for their causes in social life. The orders themselves, as created originally good by God, seem to be ideals to be striven for. And he has suggested the selection of ends and means in light of the One End, as part of our ethical task. Yet, he makes but little use of this idea as an important element in ethical decision. Wieman is more positive. He points out that this responsiveness to unpredictable possibilities (the unpredictable command of God, as Brunner would have it) which is the unique religious way of life needs to be supplemented by moral idealism--and in fact is in religion. He points out that the construction of ideals is valuable--a thing which Brunner does not specifically



suggest. "It is only the holding of the ideal as the supreme arbiter of one's course in life," says Wieman, "which is misleading, destructive, and unreligious."<sup>1</sup> Then he goes on to say later that the religious person will have ideals, "he will have objectives and guiding principles, but they will be developed as tools, feelers, out-reachings, tentative projects to facilitate the way to the greater good. They will not be the ultimate guides and goals of life."<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom of God is not an ideal to be achieved, but it is the unspecific fullness of possibility which is not beyond this world, but which will never be completely realized in history, though growth can always take place and greater fullness of life be achieved--i.e. greater mutuality. Ideals will help in bringing this to pass, and through openness of loyalty to the unpredictable good there is possible "the emergence of new ideals," or the reconstruction of tentative ideals. Brunner would accept all of this--both the danger of the ideal as the final arbiter, and the necessity of tentative ideals and the growth of the Kingdom whose consummation lies beyond history.<sup>3</sup> Wieman's treatment is more lucid, however.

Brunner would probably agree with Wieman's summation of what action a man must take, namely, "He must discover and put into practice whatever new specific objectives, habits of feeling and acting, norms, codes, rituals, organization of materials and programs as are required to elicit the fullest responsiveness of value between himself and the persons and things around him."<sup>4</sup> But to Brunner this last

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 307

<sup>3</sup> As Professor J. C. Bennett suggests, it would be interesting to compare the basis of Wieman's distrust of ideals on Dewey's relativism and Brunner's distrust based upon transcendentalism.



line would mean to establish community whose true meaning is discerned in the orders through faith in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God.

In relation to the problem of evil, Wieman has lesser difficulties than Brunner. For according to theistic naturalism God is not the source of evil, for God is not the metaphysical ground of the universe. God is only one actuality in this empirical world. He is one energy, one process; there are others. The universe is pluralistic. Wieman, with some degree of justification, criticizes Brunner for using that which he himself vehemently rejects, namely, rationalism and speculation. Wieman claims that when Brunner

identifies God with the ultimate source, 'Creator,' and the ultimate end, 'Redeemer,' he is indulging in a magnificent flight of rationalistic speculation even though he calls it revelation. It is speculation because no one knows with any assurance anything about the ultimate source of this empirical world or its ultimate outcome. . . . . He is making one of the rashest flights of speculation when he says that everything in existence, including all the evil as well as the good, has just one ultimate source. Also he is indulging in heights of speculation when he says that it is all going to come out all right in the end because of the 'Redeemer.'<sup>1</sup>

This is an extremely cogent and provocative criticism. The problem of evil and its relation to God is most puzzling, and we shall later note that Berdyaev also wrestles with it, not admitting pluralism, but holding to a form of dualism. There is perhaps a very fine point of distinction between what is held in faith to be true, and what is held to be true on the basis of rationalistic speculation. An insight of faith may be actually the product of a heightened form of the rationalistic process, and only seem to be a truth immediately given from

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<sup>1</sup> Wieman, "The New Supernaturalism," p. 75.



from some external source. Brunner claims that we know God is Creator and Redeemer through faith. Wieman holds that this belief is a product of metaphysical speculation. If Wieman is right, then Brunner's whole position--from his own point of view--falls to pieces; for his whole attempt has been to present a discussion through which the Christian could be prepared for decision--a discussion based upon the idea that God as Creator and Redeemer is the reality given us in revelation. Upon this basis ethics could be placed upon a sound foundation--a foundation of absolute reality that could not be questioned. If he had not repudiated metaphysical speculation as a valid basis for ethics, this would not be true; but he did repudiate it, and thus has no right to use ideas which are products of speculation.

Is the concept of God as Creator and Redeemer given in the revelation? If we examine the meaning or the content of the message of God which is in Jesus Christ as the Incarnation, all we can say is that the meaning is this: God is He who gives Himself. From the point of view of the Barthian conception of revelation that is about all that can be said; for it is not the historical teachings of Jesus nor his historical life that constitute a revelation of God, but simply the event of God coming in the flesh to share man's life. On such a basis it is difficult to establish the thesis that God has revealed Himself as Creator and Redeemer. But if revelation also includes general revelation, as it does for Brunner, then we have a broader field in which to work. By accepting the Old Testament as the bearer of revelation, Brunner is able to hold to the doctrine that God is revealed as Creator and Redeemer. It is only by this acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God that these ideas can be accepted as given



in revelation. Brunner holds that God permitted the prophets and apostles to say in the Holy Scriptures who He is.<sup>1</sup> Yet he insists that Jesus Christ is the Word of God in the Bible, and the Bible is God's Word only insofar as it speaks of that which is "here" in Christ.

It is a reasonable postulate--nay, more, an inescapable empirical fact that God is Redeemer. It is not only possible and admissible, but necessary that through the empirical experience of salvation which comes to men when they have faith in Jesus Christ that the doctrine of God as Redeemer be held. Expectancy of more complete redemption on the basis of this empirical experience is just as valid as Wieman's expectation of man's coming to know more of the uncomprehended fullness of possibility, which is God.

On the other hand, even accepting Brunner's general revelation, but remembering that the special revelation constitutes its truth, it seems that his doctrine of God as Creator is most precarious if its basis is revelation rather than reason. As a rational postulate, faith in God as the Creator is acceptable. But Brunner repudiates this basis of faith, and claims revelation as his basis. Therefore Wieman has a good case in criticizing Brunner, at least on the idea of God as Creator. The only way it can be upheld that God is Creator and that this is given in revelation is through an acceptance of Old Testament doctrines as revelation--doctrines, the truth of which are not constituted by the revelation in Jesus Christ. But this destroys Brunner's position, for he claims to base his whole discussion upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If God as Creator

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Our Faith, p. 8.



is not revealed in Jesus Christ, then obviously Brunner's doctrine of the orders must fall to pieces--which this writer thinks it does. The doctrine of God as Creator and Redeemer is the product of both empirical experience and rationalistic speculation. It cannot be maintained that it is given in revelation--even general revelation if the truth of that general revelation is constituted by the specific revelation in Jesus Christ. Brunner assumes altogether too much content for revelation if its truth is only that which is constituted by the event of God's coming.

Wieman also repudiates the idea of a primal sinless state of man and a falling away from that state, such as symbolized in the story of the Fall. Although Brunner lays most emphasis upon the idea of Original Sin as signifying the magnitude of sin today, he still tends to hold to the idea of a perfect creation which has fallen away from God. Wieman's repudiation of this idea on the basis that represents cosmological speculation about which we can gather no evidence can be strengthened from the other negative view, namely, that it also is not given in revelation. Sin is real to Wieman, but not in the same sense of personal enmity with a personal God. It is rather a matter of esteeming other things of lesser worth instead of being loyal to the highest. This can be overcome by a radical transformation, he says, which is wrought by the obedience of faith. But the obedience of faith is a full human act and it means readiness to receive God's goodness. "This readiness means the striving of one's whole self to find the very best that can be discovered in every concrete situation, no matter what the cost." The only difficulty here is that man cannot be radically transformed by his own striving. It is God, who



comes to us in love, that transforms us. This is ignored by Wieman, or denied, for Jesus is not the incarnation of God, nor is he Lord, but merely the founder of a fellowship of those who are devoted to the God of love. (Here Wieman clothes his "uncomprehended fullness of possibility" in Christian verbiage). Forgiveness for Wieman is the life-transforming power of this growth of community with ones fellow men. It is not, therefore, in any sense a personal relationship, and cannot provide a basis for Christian ethics as can Brunner's interpretation. An ethic based on the Incarnation can have far more transforming power than a naturalistic one, and still possess its freedom and realism.

Nicolas Berdyaev

We have considered two criticisms of Brunner. One has been from the extreme supernaturalistic position, the other from the naturalistic position, but both from within Protestantism. Now we turn to a man who is a product of the Greek Orthodox Church of Russia, now living in Paris. As far as Berdyaev and the other men following our treatment of him are concerned, we have no direct criticism of Brunner's position. Hence, from this point on our discussion will be more in the nature of a comparison than of criticism. Direct criticisms will be those made by the writer in view of the comparisons.

Berdyaev is a man of tremendous intellectual power and of sincere religious faith. Along with Brunner, he has made an outstanding contribution to the discussion of the theological basis of ethics.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. The Meaning of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), and The Destiny of Man (Same publisher, 1937).



He makes no attempt to approach the problem from the point of view of "Biblical Realism." Rather his approach is that of speculative metaphysics and mystical intuitions. Revelation is for him an inner light, and his philosophy of freedom, i.e., his ethics, is "a free cognitive reaction to revelation." It is not the will of God, but the nature of being which is the basis of ethics, and the nature of being is not known objectively nor scientifically, but it is intuited in the experience of man, who has his roots in life--in "first life." "Each man represents by virtue of his inner nature a sort of micro-cosm in which the whole world of reality and all great historical epochs combine and co-exist."<sup>1</sup> By creativity man reaches out beyond the unmeaning world to the eternal spiritual world, whose only meaning is that it has no meaning--meaning lies beyond history in the eternal world.

Berdyae夫 agrees with Brunner, Barth, and Wieman that ethics is not the formulation of rules by which persons can be guided in concrete situations. Ethics presupposes freedom, not only of the choice of values, but of the creation of values. In order to speak of the mystery of freedom myths must be used, claims Berdyae夫, for freedom cannot be rationalized. However, one might well say that what Berdyae夫 does is to use myths to illustrate that which he rationally believes.

Freedom, for Berdyae夫, is not the gift of God, but is grounded in a certain primal freedom, a Divine Nothing, an Unconditioned, out of which God creates. Therefore evil which comes from man's freedom is not in any way God's responsibility, but it rises from this "given"

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<sup>1</sup> Berdyae夫, The Meaning of History, p. 22.



primal and irrational meonic freedom. Creation, including man, is therefore a child both of being (God) and non-being (the primal irrational freedom). God is not the sovereign Creator of everything, including the evil world. He is limited by this Unconditioned out of which he creates.

This non-being consented at first to creation, but then rebelled, and this brought evil, and being became mixed with non-being. This is the meaning of the Fall. It signifies man's power and freedom as well as his infection with non-being.

Unlike the Barthians, including Brunner, Berdyaev believes that on this metaphysical basis we see that God and man cooperate in life. God's destiny and man's destiny are linked together. God calls man to cooperate with Him in creative activity, in conquering non-being. But man must answer the call out of freedom which God cannot coerce. It is really man who must answer. God cannot answer Himself in man.

For Berdyaev, the myth of the Fall represents a cosmic drama which is pre-historical and pre-earthly--an idea which Brunner faintly suggested in The Mediator. The Incarnation is regarded by Berdyaev both as an event and a myth symbolizing the eternal drama of God's seeking to overcome non-being by Divine Sacrifice, by enlightening the evil meonic freedom from within, rather than by forcing it to yield obedience in the face of external power. However, this sacrifice apparently is not going to be successful, and God will have to do something more to end history and time, both of which are results of non-being, and establish His Kingdom through Christ's second coming.



Berdyaeve, as suggested, does not hold that man's being a creature is a sign of degradation or slavery. Man as God's creation has dignity and power. The Fall, through which man chose knowledge over ignorance also shows nobility, even though evil came out of this choice. The Fall is the myth about the birth of consciousness with its painful dividedness, but it also shows man's willingness to share God's tragic destiny. The evil in the world arises from man's reliance on his principle of wisdom which prevents his transition to a higher consciousness. In his attempt to solve the paradox involved in the myth of the Fall, Berdyaeve finds himself baffled, and so ends by claiming that it is rationally impossible to solve the problem and leaves it.

But Berdyaeve does not merely point out man's dignity as seen in the myth of the Fall, but he goes on to say that man is actually the Second Person of the Trinity; i.e., man who is born in eternity. Man is the 'otherness' of God, the divine-human spirit. Man shares in the totality of all being. He is the Trinity inverted.<sup>1</sup> (This does not refer to the psycho-physical being on earth, but to man as eternal spirit). Through the Fall man has become a sinner, divided between the conscious and the unconscious. Man's recovery cannot be attained through moral consciousness which expresses itself in laws and norms. "It can only be effected through the superconsciousness, which belongs to the spiritual world. This presupposes a new ethics, based not upon the norms and laws of the consciousness but upon gracious spiritual power."<sup>2</sup> This would be a most shocking statement to Brunner,

<sup>1</sup> Berdyaeve, The Destiny of Man, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 100.



yet one wonders if it is not nearer truth. The true man, deep down at the very soul of his being, is that which is the Divine image. It is that which responds to God and seeks cooperatively to overcome the non-being and evil which has infected creation.

Berdyaev interestingly enough also has three types of ethics which in a way correspond to Brunner's three-fold division of the law. First is the Ethics of Law, herd-morality, which corresponds to what Brunner called the Lex. Like Brunner, Berdyaev points out that this both warps human life and also preserves it. It is necessary for the sinful world, impersonal though it is. Second, there is the Ethics of Redemption which is not concerned with our ordinary concepts of good and evil, but consists of actions performed in cooperation with God. It is action based on personal relations to God and to ones neighbor, not for social problems. It is the ethic of love. It is the absolute morality of the Gospel which is impossible to apply in our relative world. It is a revelation of the world to come, the Kingdom of God. It cannot be the basis of the state, the family, or of economic life. These can never be Christian. The Kingdom can come only in personal relationships. All this sounds very much like the assertions of Brunner. But this second type of ethics seems to include parts of both of Brunner's last two characterizations of law. And when Berdyaev comes to his third classification of ethics and calls it the Ethics of Creativeness, he goes beyond Brunner. Man is not called merely to obedience, but is called by God to creativity. This creative activity is "a process of interaction between grace and freedom, between forces going from God to man and from man to God."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 168.



Brunner could not agree with this, but he would understand Berdyaev's comment that the primary creative act is the interaction between man and God, and the secondary act, in which the fire is inevitably cooled, is the concrete expression of the primary act in the sinful world. At least Brunner would appreciate that no act is perfectly good as it finds expression in this sinful world. But there is a noticeable lack of any idea of "justification by faith" or the need of forgiveness because the secondary act is imperfect in the sinful world in Berdyaev's thought.

The ethics of creativeness are not divorced from the Gospel, although at times there seems to be a dualism between creativeness and morality. Berdyaev considers love as creative. It seeks the realization of the good and the transformation of the evil into good, rather than the mere destruction of evil. This creativeness springs out of judgments of conscience, which "is the meeting place of freedom and grace."<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit is the relation between man (as eternal divine spirit) and God--it is also called by Berdyaev the meeting place of grace and freedom. "True creativeness is always in the Holy Spirit." Unlike Brunner, Berdyaev gives a most important place to mystical contemplation and to imagination in the creative ethical life. Both of these are ignored by Brunner, the former being repudiated, while for Berdyaev it is the highest form of creativeness. While Brunner, more healthily in one way, does not separate man's relation to God and his relation to his fellow men, Berdyaev considers that man is called to ascend to God (in mystical contemplation) and also to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 214.



descend into the sinful world to help his brothers attain spiritual energy and to share their fate. Both these views have truth in them. Man needs to meet God in the service of his fellow men--but there is undoubted validity in the mystical experience, and transforming power in it, which humanity must not ignore.

In his treatment of concrete problems, Berdyaev has no doctrine of the orders to uphold, and the problem is not stated as the relation between fulfilling one's office and at the same time acting in a personal relation of love. Rather the problem is a choice of values and the determining of what the highest value is which should be chosen.

Yet Berdyaev faces the problems in much the same manner as Brunner. He says we face the paradox in that 'Do not kill' is an absolute law, (though it is not clear wherein he has a basis for the proclamation of an absolute law). Yet sometimes a man must kill in order that there should be less killing in the world and the highest values be preserved. He also recognizes with the Continental theologians that we must face the paradox that the struggle of the good against the evil always produces more evil. One might question the validity of that "always," but yet we do know that in the struggle for a new order, in which Berdyaev also agrees we should engage, is involved the creation, quite often at least, of more evil. And like Brunner he admits that sometimes one must act harshly and pitilessly in personal relations in order to save the world from greater suffering. His treatment of the state is very similar to that of Brunner. He does not declare it an order given by God, yet he maintains



that its duty is to preserve order, and that it must be supported for this reason even though when it strives for power it is seen to contain a demonic principle. There will always be strife between the individual and the state, for the individual, says Berdyaev, is moving towards the Kingdom, but the State is not. He also recognizes an "official duty" of the citizen as a public official, in which capacity he must perform acts different from those of personal relations. In relation to war, he is not as positive as is Brunner in his recognition that probably war is now so self-defeating that it should be repudiated. He seems to think that war is part of man's tragic destiny, yet holds that its own fatal dialectic will destroy it faster than any peace movement.

Berdyaev is far more vehement in his repudiation of the right of capital punishment than is Brunner. Brunner insists that the state has the right to take life. Berdyaev, on the contrary, maintains that the state has forfeited this right, if it ever had it.

In relation to the subject of the right of revolution, he is not far removed from Brunner. He considers that Heaven makes the decision, not merely men, when the old order is so rotten that its spiritual foundations have crumbled. The Christian should accept the revolution once it comes "inwardly and not externally," neither opposing it nor assisting it outwardly.

In relation to labor Berdyaev says it is both a curse and man's creative calling. Much labor is not creative, but it can be always redemptive, i.e. have ascetic value. This interpretation is foreign to the thought of Brunner, but the added statement of Berdyaev to the effect that even uncreative labor can symbolize man's sharing



of the burden of the world is not unlike Brunner's.

In regard to property, both men hold the same position.

Brunner held that property must be regarded in light of both the individual and the community needs and rights. Berdyaev denies the right of unlimited economic power to both individuals and to the collective group. The Christian attitude, both men say, is stewardship.

As to improving the economic system, both men think Christians should seek constructive change, but not regard the new order as the Kingdom of God, for it lies beyond history. Berdyaev criticizes the depersonalization inherited by socialism from capitalism, and also thinks it must be freed from resentment and the levelling down process. As far as this sinful world is concerned, he thinks that democracy, though having evils of its own, is probably the best form of direction for political and economic life--and herein differs slightly from Brunner, who is considerably more dubious of democracy. However, a great deal of freedom remains to the individual to choose what he will defend or create. All worldly things are relative, so no unambiguous criteria can be established.

Berdyaev, like Brunner, launches a devastating attack upon the prohibition of divorce, pointing out that it is a legalistic interpretation of Christianity. Like Brunner, he feels that few marriages are based on real love, but unlike Brunner thinks that a mystical love is the basis of permanence, and that when marriage has this element in it it is a true sacrament. He makes no mention of fidelity as the basis of marriage, as does Brunner, who links it to the preservation



of the orders. Unlike Brunner, Berdyaev holds that monogamy is unnatural. Monogamous marriage could be only on the basis of this rare mystical love. Actually in our modern world monogamous marriage is a conventional lie and an expression of legalistic nominalism, claims Berdyaev. Since he has no doctrine of the orders to sustain, he is more free to interpret marriage on a basis of psychology and sociology than is Brunner. He makes very slight reference to birth-control, merely pointing out that sexual intercourse is not to be regarded as for the purpose of procreation only, for that would put it upon the level of cattle breeding.

Berdyaev has a large section in his volume, The Destiny of Man, on Eschatological ethics, in which he deals with death and immortality, the meaning of hell and paradise. It is in this other eternal world, which we can sometimes foretaste in mystical activity or in highly creative activity of love, that the real meaning of life lies. Hell is not eternal, but only the Kingdom of God is. In the end, all will be saved, else there can be no Kingdom.

Berdyaev's difference from Brunner can be fairly well seen from his summarizing paragraph:

The main position of an ethics which recognizes the paradox of good and evil may be formulated as follows: act as though you could hear the Divine call to participate through free and creative activity in the Divine work; cultivate in yourself a pure and original conscience, discipline your personality, struggle with evil in yourself and around you--not in order to relegate the wicked to hell and create a kingdom of evil, but to conquer evil and to further a creative regeneration of the wicked.<sup>1</sup>

All through his discussion it has been clear that the basis of his

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 377.



thought is ontological rather than teleological. He perhaps over-emphasizes the one and overlooks the necessity of teleological considerations. But his demand for creativity is wholesome and valid for the Christian. It appears, however, that creativity needs a guiding purpose as well as a stimulus, which would call for a greater place for teleological considerations. Berdyaev recognizes a need for some guide, but just what this guide or ultimate criteria is does not appear. Apparently it is human welfare of the whole derived from the absolute law or norm of the Gospel which is for purely personal relations. His "mythological" thinking is baffling, though stimulating. His reluctance to give up the traditional myths and their interpretations involves him in an unnecessary paradox regarding the Fall, and it seems that when metaphysical speculation gets into the realms beyond the actual world of time and space that it becomes fruitless. His eschatology is similar to Brunner's and is likewise confusing. His assertion that the Gospel teachings are a revelation of the Kingdom that is to come is inadmissible, for the teachings of Jesus plainly refer to human relations on this earthly plane and in this sinful world. How could one love his enemies in the Kingdom of God where there were no enemies? Brunner's assertion that the Gospel teachings are for purely personal relations is more acceptable. Berdyaev, and to a lesser extent, Brunner, emphasize the tragic sense of life and of defeat in this world. Both have missed something--for the note of triumphant joy fills the New Testament.

Berdyaev is a good antidote for Brunner on at least three points: First, in his assertion that ethics deal with divine-human



action--God calls man to cooperate in overcoming non-being. Second, in his indication of the place of mystical contemplation in creative ethical living. Third, in his doctrine of God, where he points out that God is limited and that there is movement, struggle, and continuous creative action on the part of the Divine in overcoming non-being. This removes the problems arising out of a concept of the absolute sovereignty of God, i.e., of God as the source of the world as it is with its evil and sin. It also eliminates the necessity of the doctrine of election.

The interesting thing to note is the very great similarity of practical suggestions when dealing with actual social problems between Berdyaev and Brunner, although in their theological traditions they are far separated. Both men agree that the real area of the ethic of the Gospel is in personal relations. Yet when they discuss social problems they come pretty close to the same conclusions, which indicates that perhaps a common spirit working upon the normal rational processes, or through them, produces much the same type of thought in relation to the problem of solving social problems.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Niebuhr mediates European theology to America. He has not systematically labored through the production of a theology, but has brought his beliefs to bear sharply upon social problems, and has recently written a book particularly relevant to our discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr is the prophet of the absolute ethic which judges all

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, (New York: Harper & Bros., 1935).



man's relativities and keeps him in a state of continual humility and tension. His thought is based upon the main stream of the prophetic element in the Hebrew-Christian tradition. He conceives of God as both the source and fulfilment of life, as the creator and the judge. Human life thus stands always before God as created and judged. This double recognition of source and fulfilment is necessary for a profound morality. "A religious morality is constrained by its sense of a dimension of depth to trace every force with which it deals to some ultimate origin and to relate every purpose to some ultimate end."<sup>1</sup> The prophetic stream of the Hebrew Christian tradition does this.

Niebuhr believes that the ethical fruitfulness of all religions depends upon the quality of the tension which it creates between the historical values and values which transcend all history. In this is seen the superiority of the prophetic spirit which maintains a high degree of tension between man's values and God's demands. While Brunner also, by the second interpretation of the three-fold law, presents an absolute law demanding repentance, creating tension, making complacency impossible, he also finds a certain degree of release and "good conscience" through his doctrine of the orders and justification by faith. Niebuhr gives far less attention to this than Brunner. He dwells very little upon justification by faith, through which God "covers" man's necessary sinful action by his forgiveness and counts him as righteous. However, in his later works he gives more attention to grace and forgiveness. Through God's grace men are given a measure of peace even within their state of tension. They experience sin

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 5.



forgiven, even though not overcome. This brings him close to Brunner's emphasis upon justification by faith. We have peace within our historical lives and hope that in some way God will redeem us completely. Yet in his major emphasis, Niebuhr remains more of the prophet than the priest.

The basis of Niebuhr's Absolute ethic is rooted primarily in the prophetic spirit rather than in any interpretation of particular teachings of Jesus. Yet, Jesus as the full flowering of the prophetic spirit assumes a place of great importance, for it is he who brings the transcendent ethic which will always create tension between itself and the prudent and relative systems of ethics by which men live. This conception of Jesus is quite different from Brunner's thought of him in the typical Reformation style as the Mediator.

For Niebuhr the ethic of Jesus has only one dimension, a vertical one between man and God. And since love is the quintessence of the character of God, Jesus laid down an absolute love ethic.<sup>1</sup> He never considered whether it was practical or not. Ethics were determined by his conception of the nature of God and His demands, not by prudential considerations of how to meet practical problems. Therefore Niebuhr maintains that it is impossible to make a prudential ethic out of the teaching of Jesus. He does not make a distinction between personal relations and action within one's "office" as does Brunner,

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. C. C. McCown maintains that from the point of view of New Testament scholarship it appears that Niebuhr has absolutized a relative ethic, for much of the ethical teaching of Jesus was relative to his world-view, i.e. to the idea that the Kingdom of God was about to come. Much of it was interim ethic. On the other hand, the eschatology of Jesus apparently was not consistent, and did not determine all his ethical teachings. Some prudential elements are not absent.



apparently not accepting this doctrine. But he does recognize how a man who is moral in his personal life finds himself forced into unethical action in his group life in society. He recognizes that the absolute ethic of Jesus is never fully applicable in this world, yet maintains that it is always relevant. It is a flying standard, a dynamic ideal, an "impossible possibility." It is a challenge and a judgment. This absolute love ethic is not discontinuous with what is known to man. God is involved in every moral situation, according to the prophetic interpretation. Thus every temporal value is grounded in and points toward a perfection which is not realizable in any historic situation--every prudent ethic is grounded in and points toward this "impossible possibility" which may be approximated on earth but which really will be fulfilled only beyond history. In thus maintaining a close relation between God and every moral situation and in recognizing the relation between every prudent ethic and the "impossible possibility", Niebuhr is distinctly removed from Brunner's position, which makes a division between ordinary morality and the Christian ethic. However, like Brunner and the others we have discussed, Niebuhr makes the Kingdom of God into an otherworldly category. But one might still dare to ask if this is the best re-interpretation the concept of the Kingdom can be given. If the Kingdom of God deals with the reign of God among human beings, then it must be an earthly category--which it probably was for the prophets and Jesus. And if that Kingdom is to be established by the grace of God, where does that grace operate but in humans? While Niebuhr criticizes Orthodoxy for destroying tension by removing the ideal from the world, he comes somewhat near that himself,



even though vehemently asserting its relevancy. When one accepts the impossibility but relevance of an ideal he may under the strain of one long unresolved tension finally settle down into an even more dangerous complacency--the complacency of experiencing the tension, but doing little about it, because it is impossible to achieve the ideal.

In contradistinction to Brunner, Niebuhr makes very little of the idea of freedom and the unpredictable nature of the future and its requirements or even of its emergents. Yet he is very close to Brunner in thinking of God as Creator and Judge, while giving little place to God's day by day creativity. Both Wieman and Berdyaev are better in this particular respect.

Like Brunner's, the center of Niebuhr's thought concerning sin is that it is rebellion against God, and he tends likewise to reduce the whole human problem to the problem of sin, while he himself has made a distinction between sin and finiteness and should be clearer in his treatment. Likewise when both he and Brunner emphasize sin as rebellion or the attempt to become God oneself, then sin is defined too narrowly, and our common sins of complacency, petty jealousy, and insensitivity are overlooked. Niebuhr, along with Berdyaev and Brunner, runs the danger which Professor John C. Bennett has pointed out of taking insufficient notice of the degrees of sin, both in the form of degrees of moral responsibility and in the form of degrees of objective evil.<sup>1</sup> There should be a clear distinction between the sense of tension and the sense of guilt. Tension should remain even though

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Bennett, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr," Religion in Life, Spring 1937, p. 282.



we are forced to compromise, but surely one is not equally guilty for that which he could not do, and for that which he simply did not do. This is closely related to the obliteration of the distinction between good and evil, which all these men tend to do when they think religiously. The emphasis that in the sight of God all men are sinners tends to destroy the relevance of the Christian religion for moral distinctions and moral effort. The Absolute Law of Brunner, the pure creativity of Berdyaev, and the absolute Christian ideal of Niebuhr are so far removed from our relativities which are on the other hand painted in such gloomy colors that there seems to be no possible relation between them. Although Niebuhr attempts to establish justice as the practical application of love to social life and make it relevant, he himself once wrote: "To approach the relative problem of justice in the realm of politics from the absolute perspective of the Christian ideal is a little like judging the merits of house painting by cannons of art which guide Rembrandt."<sup>1</sup> This expresses an idea very similar to Brunner's insistence that the absolute law of love is not at all applicable to our life in the orders. Yet both men insist that this absolute ideal judges our relativity. One is inclined to say that if that which is impossible passes a judgment of guilt upon us, then judgment has lost most of its true meaning.

It is well that this position is practically qualified by Niebuhr's attempt to relate our actual conduct to the absolute through the mediation, as it were, of justice. This establishes a practical norm which is more easily applicable than Brunner's rather complex doctrine of the orders, through which he gets around the "wholly otherness"

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 283. Quoted from Christianity and the Social Revolution, p. 445.



of God and his absolute demand. If love cannot be a principle for group relations, then there is need to interpret what its nearest approximation shall be. Dr. Gregory Vlastos also attempts to make love relevant in somewhat this manner, but comes much nearer identifying love with justice and mutuality than does Niebuhr.<sup>1</sup> For him, love as a social norm becomes cooperative activity and community of interest. Niebuhr, on the other hand emphasizes the coercive aspect of justice rather than its cooperative and persuasive aspects. He recognizes that the law of love is a norm, but not an obligation. "Orthodox Christianity," he says, "was therefore quite right in establishing a more relative moral ideal than that of love--the ideal of justice as the guiding criterion of political relations."<sup>2</sup> This ideal of justice is frankly based upon natural law--upon obligations as conceived by human reason. Brunner would agree with at least the latter half of this statement, but would not necessarily recognize natural law in the Orthodox sense. Brunner likewise would not agree with Niebuhr's assertion that justice is to be judged on the basis of the principle of equality. The equality of believers before God, says Niebuhr, has social significance, and Christianity must seek to mitigate basic social inequalities. But equality, even for Niebuhr, is not a final social principle from which legalistic codes can be drawn, for it is always judged by the higher principle of love. Nevertheless, Niebuhr makes much more positive use of this principle of equality

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Scott and Vlastos, Towards the Christian Revolution, (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1936), p. 59

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Conference Book, Christian Faith and Common Life, p. 82.



than does Brunner, maintaining that "Equality may be the approximation in the realm of law of the principle of love."<sup>1</sup> He denies that "the ideal of equality does violence to the organic character of human existence, that it fails to recognize the fact of sin and that its rationalism is incompatible with Christian faith."<sup>2</sup> In this statement he is obviously far removed from Brunner who tends to affirm precisely what this denies. For Niebuhr there seems to be a sort of hierarchy of guiding principles which guide us in political action. The immediate principle is justice--coercive basic justice secured through a balance of power which maintains the tension between opposing forces. But the ideal of justice is to be judged on the basis of the principle of equality, which in turn is to be judged in its turn by the principle of love. In spite of this theological difference, however, all three men--Brunner, Vlastos, and Niebuhr--are fairly close in their solutions of practical problems, for Brunner's guiding ideal of community is very much akin to the justice and mutuality which Vlastos seeks and to the basic justice and equality which Niebuhr desires. However, Brunner's insistence on the autonomy of the orders tends to give a stronger conservative trend to his social ethic, while Niebuhr and Vlastos both tend toward Marxian social action, although not favoring insurrectionism.

There is much in common between Brunner and Niebuhr, even though there is a considerable difference of emphasis. Brunner's ethic is based upon the event of revelation, with only secondary attention to the absolute law. Niebuhr, while recognizing the place of revelation, does not speak so incessantly of this event or of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 91.



Mediator, but thinks of Jesus as the bringer of an absolute ethic which is a relevant standard, a flying goal, which provides a transcendental judgment upon all our relative human situations. Grace is not so much God's forgiveness through the Mediator as it is a human experience. "Essentially," says Niebuhr, "the experience of grace in religion is the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. The unachieved is in some sense felt to be achieved or realized. The sinner is justified even though his sin is not overcome."<sup>1</sup> The idea of justification here set forth is very similar to Brunner's, but Niebuhr probably does not limit the means of the mediation of the grace of God as does Brunner.

#### V. A. Demant

One of the most thorough analyses of social problems, particularly in the field of economic life, has been presented by V. A. Demant, an Anglo-Catholic, in his book, God, Man, and Society. Walter M. Horton expressed his estimate of the sociological side of Anglo-Catholicism by saying:

I have been more impressed and influenced by it than by anything else I have encountered in England. It has convinced me that Christian ethics and Christian social action should not be something "plastered on," something wholly separate from Christian theology, but something growing out of it by a deep organic affinity. The precise measures advocated by this school, such as Douglas Social Credit, cannot of course claim the same theological sanction as the central principles of ethics; but they are in carefully calculated harmony with those principles, and in my opinion thoroughly feasible. . . . My adherence to this program for securing economic plenty and justice for all has been greatly strengthened by the writings of Reckitt and Demant.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. C. Bennett, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 279; quoted from Reflections on the End of an Era, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Horton, Contemporary English Theology, (New York: Harper & Bros., 1936), footnote, pp. 107-108.



The Anglo-Catholics make no attempt to find an Absolute Law in the teachings of Jesus which can be regarded as a transcendental ideal and judgment. They are not attempting to find divine norms or principles or divinely given orders. They seek no divine command to tell them what to do in every concrete situation. But in them we find a group which considers the Church as the living Body of Christ which is to minister to the whole man and the whole of mankind. Upon the basis of what the Church believes about God, man, and society, this group sets out frankly to make a thorough sociological analysis and to seek a program which will minister to the whole man. Here is a group which has no fear of rationalism, but is willing to test its beliefs by rational methods. Although the ultimate appeal is made to the authority of the Church and of revelation, yet the authority of the Church is not infallible. It must stand testing "at the three-fold bar of history, reason, and spiritual experience."<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Barthians who repudiate "natural theology" the Anglo-Catholic believes that "Catholic authority and scholarly freedom, divine revelation and human reason, far from being antagonistic principles, represent 'tempers of the religious mind which only reach their maturity in combination.'"<sup>2</sup>

Yet the doctrines of the Anglo-Catholics are not greatly different from those of Protestantism, except those dealing with the Church and the Sacraments. The concept of God and the Trinity is much the same, as is also the doctrine of Christ who, it is insisted

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 109. Horton quotes from Essays Catholic and Critical, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 112.



was both God and man--a true Incarnation. In relation to Sin, Grace, and Atonement the Anglo-Catholic is less orthodox. The strict doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin is not held, it being recognized that man was not created perfect and thereafter fell away from perfection, but that he is a descendant from the anthropoids. However, sin is recognized, for man and society are not what God intended, and are a libel on human nature as He purposed it.

God's grace is believed to flow through all things except sin, but it is especially manifested in its fullness in Christ and the Cross. The Atonement is recognized as having moral and exemplary powers, but there is more objective content of meaning given, and through this the doctrine leads decidedly away from Protestant thought to the Catholic view of the Church as the bearer of supernatural grace through the Sacraments, and especially through the Mass, in which Christ's real presence is experienced. This follows from the view that God became united permanently with our race in the Incarnation. "The divine-human life of the Incarnate Word must be continued in the divine-human life of the Church, which forms His living Body, ever guided and renewed by His Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

The Incarnation rather than the Atonement is the central doctrine of relevance for the ethic of Anglo-Catholicism. W. G. Peck points out that the incarnation implies the "spiritual solidarity of the race. . . . It affected the whole human race in all times and places."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur O. McGiffert, "Walter Rauschenbusch: Twenty Years After," Christendom, Winter, 1938, quoted from Social Implications of the Oxford Movement.



Therefore man's social life must be redeemed. A. C. McGiffert says that

underlying this theory is the realistic view of human nature which has had long currency in the church. Realism accounts universals alone real. Humanity or man has a greater reality than individual men. Individual men partake of reality in so far as they participate in man or humanity. By becoming incarnate in humanity Christ has become incarnate in every individual human being. Every last individual human being is thus seen to have significance for God. We therefore cannot accept without challenge the practical obliteration of that significance so characteristic of many areas of contemporary social living. . . . Whereas the evangelical doctrine of the atonement lays stress upon the birth and death of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the Incarnation takes the whole of his life into account. By obvious implication the whole of our human lives is also significant. One cannot overlook the complete contest of any given individual in endeavoring to save his soul.<sup>1</sup>

This same idea of the Incarnation, that is by faith in Christ as the brother of man, gives great inspiration and motive power for social work.

It is upon this basis, obviously different from Brunner's position, that V. A. Demant claims that "religion has an essential task in drawing within her field of salvation the social problems of mankind."<sup>2</sup> And it is upon this same basis that Demant, unlike Brunner, makes much of power for action, for accomplishing the good as well as insight to see it. He believes that the Kingdom of God, though ultimately not for this world, is effective in this world in redeeming the secular order. Grace is sufficient for all problems. "The central truth of religion is that the will of God can and must reign in all spheres of human activity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> V. A. Demant, God, Man and Society, (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1934), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 9.



The judgment which the Church should make on social situations is on the basis of their actual effect in encouraging or hindering the response of human beings to spiritual demands--not on the basis of whether or not they effectively fulfil their capacities as particular autonomous orders, as was Brunner's criteria of judgment. The social situation "is to be judged by the effect it has upon man, the sinner, in pushing him into personal evil or in encouraging virtue in him."<sup>1</sup>

The second practical Christian witness is what Demant calls work of alleviation. It is the same as Brunner's suggestion of practical social service. But Demant points out that this witness shows the Church's recognition that "most of the evils human beings suffer are not the results of personal failure but of social disintegration, and that responsibility for them spreads to the community as a whole."<sup>2</sup>

The third kind of practical witness is the definite attempts at constructive Christian action. It is notable that Demant does not hesitate to speak of Christian social action. Unlike Brunner he is not unduly fearful of a Christian programme, although he certainly does not identify the Kingdom of God with any relative program. But a programme may be Christian, though relative, just as a person may be Christian, though still a sinner.

Demant agrees that "the Churches' moral and spiritual resources have to be largely concerned with standards of personal behaviour," but thinks a great deal of attention must now, at this particular time, be given to the social circumstances which so seriously

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 13.



determine so much of the conduct of individuals. He makes a thorough analysis of the disintegrating effect of most of our social life on man's spiritual life. Rather than the unmeaningfulness of social life giving validity to Christian faith, such as Brunner and Berdyaev both suggest, Demant considers that it challenges Christian faith in the supremacy of the spiritual. If the spiritual forces cannot redeem social life so that it shall have meaning, then the Christian faith is vain. This is the inescapable challenge that the Church must face, rather than retreating into her fortress and waiting for God's great cataclysmic act which will end history. It is not enough that men should be made communally minded. They need to have faith that spiritual power is supreme in the whole real world.

Demant emphasizes the point that industrial society cannot be independent of religious sanctions and objectives. Before the world can get out of its muddle it must get a clear conception as to the proper order of means and ends in all its activities. And this vision or order cannot be achieved from the inside, where expediency is the ruling concern, but from the outside, from a conception of human life as a whole. This order needs to be visualized in relation to true human needs. "These ultimate human needs cannot be discovered from the present demands of men entangled in the social struggle itself; these will always be largely relative, partial, or negative. The discovery must come from a sphere of knowledge which sees human beings as more than merely social victims or as the raw material for social solutions."<sup>1</sup> In this Demant takes the opposite stand from

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 32.



Brunner who thinks the solution must be worked out in the struggle itself and that attempts to visualize a reconstructed order are futile utopianism. Demant considers that the Christian religion, knowing the essential nature of man, should get a new vision of order for the several social activities. Only religion can save the world from slavery to its means, and demand revision of these in view of the true end. The Church should, thinks Demant, set forth "an order in human activities with her ultimate spiritual laws as standards of reference."<sup>1</sup>

Demant thinks that there are three valid human motives: spiritual fulfilment, gain, and service, "which are the subjective aspects of man's relationship to God, to the earth, and to his fellows."<sup>2</sup> The problem is to get them satisfied together without having them get in one another's way. "Where it appears possible to satisfy all three demands, and one of them becomes disproportionately operative in the lives of men, there is the sphere of direct moral or social appeal. Where, on the other hand, with a considerable amount of the required feeling, intelligence, and will, the satisfaction of one or two of these motives is found to conflict with the other or others, there we have a problem of religious sociology."<sup>3</sup> This discriminating analysis of Demant's was not mentioned nor apparently recognized by Brunner. Demant feels that this second type of problem is the most acute one today. There is both a moral problem for ethics, i.e., stimulating social feeling, intelligence, and will; and a sociological problem, that arise "when such social feeling, intelligence, and will are found to be incompatible in the circumstances with the legitimate

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 46.



demands of both economic enrichment for preservation and culture and with the realization of spiritual values in secular achievement."<sup>1</sup>

So Demant leads in the formation of a Christian sociology, for that is the great need of the present day. This is an emphasis missed in the other men to whom we have referred, save possibly Wieman. The remainder of Mr. Demant's book is a careful analysis of the problems in the social life of our modern world, too detailed for treatment here, where our concern is primarily with the theological basis of ethics.

We can note a few things, however. First we note that Demant's conception of the state shows an emphasis not found in Brunner, which is natural inasmuch as he approaches the problem from a more purely sociological point of view. Admitting with Brunner that the state is ordained by God, he goes on to say that its purpose is not simply the maintenance of order, but of a just order. He conceives of its task more positively than as merely restraint of evil and prevention of chaos. Unless the state helps preserve not only order, but also aims at the creation of moral order, it will disintegrate and be unable to preserve any order or peace.

Demant does not discuss pacifism, nor does he spend much time on the good but superficial peace programs. In dealing with the problem of war we must deal "with actual desires or sense of injury or deprivation physical or spiritual, under which the parties are smarting, and around which the individualist and egoistic sentiment cluster."<sup>2</sup> This makes it clear that the sin of egoism is not as fundamental a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 49.



cause of war as the conflict of desires. Demant goes beyond Brunner also in evaluating the causes of war and pointing out the major importance of the economic problem. Economic warfare leads to military warfare. Economic warfare is caused by defective distribution within each nation which drives it into a battle for access to cheap raw materials and lucrative markets. The Church therefore must seek both to transform unworthy desires, and to create a just peace.

Demant does not fear Church participation in actual political action, although of course it should not identify itself or its cause with any temporal political program. He says, "The Christian faith does not imply belief in one fixed pattern of society, but demands certain conditions in the ordering of life which give priority and importance to the respective activities of human existence in relation to the supernatural end of human beings. To proclaim that order is the task of the teaching office of the Church; to decide which particular political structure best directs a community to order its life in that way is the task of the body of Christians as citizens."<sup>1</sup> The main difference here from Brunner's position is that the Church is called upon to lay upon the State the necessity of maintaining a just order, i.e. the proper relation of a hierarchy of activities, rather than the ordering and preservation of equally autonomous divine orders.

In his analysis of the economic problem, Demant's whole emphasis centers around the distinction between real wealth and money. He agrees with Brunner in the danger of the economic order becoming

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 177.



idolatrous, which it now is, making other aims subservient to it. But he does not credit this to human sinfulness as much as to bad ideas. "The worst evils of the world are due," he says, "not to bad men, for they cannot injure all men all the time, but to false theories of good men."<sup>1</sup> And this is why there is such a great need for a Christian sociology. The economic programme which Demant thinks is most Christian and most hopeful is the one referred to by W. M. Horton, i.e., the Douglas Social Credit Plan.

Demant is much more optimistic than Brunner and Niebuhr and even than Berdyaev. He has no confidence in mere moral exhortation, or in the power of an ideal. But he says, men "are moved by words of affirmation as to what they are or can be, a revelation of the truth about themselves that comes as a discovery, or they are moved to act by provocation at an offensive declaration of what someone thinks they are. The faith that has moved men has always been an indicative before it was an imperative."<sup>2</sup> He insists that the intolerable dilemma of a social order where Christian ethics cannot be applied need not remain. He would not be favorable to Brunner's pessimistic view that in social life man must always be forced into sin, and thus brought to repentance and to God's forgiveness. "You cannot moralize a contradiction," he says. A harmony between man's inner and outer life must be secured. A new social life must be found based upon a Christian philosophy, rather than merely attempting to inject Christian ideals into the present society. "When the Kingdom of God is known again as

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> V. A. Demant, "Can Christianity Be Applied," Christendom, Summer 1938.



a power that reorders the social relations of man by bringing them back to their natural state, then the problem of the conflict between the inner and the outer life becomes manageable. With that achievement Christians can begin to talk with reality about the religious responsibility for world order.<sup>1</sup> Thus the Kingdom is seen as power and movement not only in personal relations but in reordering society. The Kingdom of God is thus not conceived as the one far-off divine event, nor merely as the best in man, "but a present transforming force acting in the temporal order from beyond."<sup>2</sup> This has elements similar to Brunner's thought, but is more optimistic in relation to the possibility of making life in the social order compatible with the Christian ethic. Brunner recognizes the movement of the Kingdom on earth, but in the last analysis these are only tokens of the one far-off divine event, which is the reality. But for Demant the emphasis is upon the actual transforming power which can overcome evil here and now. Here is dependence on God, but not merely for forgiveness and for the giving of a good conscience in a bad situation; but here is dependence upon God for knowledge of what the proper order of life should be and the power to shape it. The difficult question is: Is the spiritual supreme? or is evil more deeply entrenched in human nature so that always there will be an intolerable tension between what ought to be done and what is possible to be done in this world--a tension which drives men to a faith in the otherworldly Kingdom.

Jacques Maritain

Whereas Brunner takes his inspiration and major point of

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



reference from the Reformers, Maritain returns to the Catholic master theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>1</sup> Here he finds an adequate theological basis for social ethics. This basis, as is true of Brunner when he considers problems within the orders, proves to be more a motive and a general direction towards human betterment, than a provision of certain guidance for social action which is always sinful and relative. Both men agree that Christians should work through channels open to them for social reconstruction, yet point out that they may find themselves in opposite camps in actual social conflict. Both agree that the Church as such and Christians as such, should not act in the temporal realm of social problems, but that Christians as citizens should do so.<sup>2</sup> Only when the Church as such finds its rights interfered with by the totalitarian state should it take positive and direct action.

The center of Maritain's thought in the volume under consideration is the problem of economic and political action as presented to us by modern conditions, and particularly as set before us by Communism, which he considers as the last stage of rationalistic humanism. This is a false humanism which results in the dehumanization of man because it is metaphysically materialistic and atheistic and therefore divorces man from the essence of his true humanity, i.e., God. The only way to restore true human dignity and respect for personality along with the establishment of real human welfare in all the areas of life is to substitute another form of civilization characterized by an

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<sup>1</sup> Our discussion will be based upon Maritain's recent book: True Humanism, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Maritain, True Humanism, p. 265.



integral humanism for the present capitalistic or communistic ones.

This idea of integral humanism is closely akin to what Brunner termed "Christian humanism"<sup>1</sup> and has the same theological basis; i.e., man as created in the image of God and the doctrine of the Incarnation. The difference in the conceptions of the Incarnation brings some variation of interpretation, however. For Maritain the new humanism means an "evangelical concern for humanity which ought not to exist only in the spiritual order, but to become incarnate;"<sup>2</sup> and a direction of this concern towards the achievement of a true brotherhood among men. It will call men to sacrifice "for the sake of a better life for their fellows and for the concrete good of the community of human individuals; so that the humble truth of brotherly love may advance . . . . to the permeation of the social order and the structures of common life."<sup>3</sup>

Brunner calls for the service of our neighbor, i.e., of other concrete persons, through community, because this is the only way of service to God. Maritain, in true Catholic fashion, separates or distinguishes between love of God and love of man. For him there is a spiritual plane of activity (specifically religious activity--worship, works of mercy, contemplation, evangelism, etc.) and a temporal plane of activity where we act as citizens of an earthly city (intellectual, moral, scientific, artistic, social and political activity). This distinction is rejected by Brunner, and the second type of activity in which we serve the whole man, i.e., our neighbor, is also our service of God, for God wills to meet us with His demand in our neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Maritain, True Humanism, p. xvii.      <sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Maritain criticizes the Reformers for their pessimism which he considers separates the spiritual and temporal life by a vast gulf. He points out this weakness in the Reformation theology as we observe its recrudescence in Karl Barth. The Middle Ages, he maintains, held a more profound sense of human nature, recognizing both its dignity and its weakness. The idea that man is essentially corrupt, he maintains, means that it remains corrupt under grace, and grace does not enable a man to have a truly new life, "but is a covering cloak."<sup>1</sup> He criticizes also the protestant doctrine of freedom. Of this doctrine he says, "There is no free-will; it has been killed by original sin. This is the meaning, briefly stated, of the doctrines of predestination and reprobation as understood by the various schools of Protestantism: the theology of grace without freedom."<sup>2</sup> The Catholic has a more positive attitude. Although God takes the initiative in salvation and in good acts, His initiative is only primary. The person has himself to take the secondary initiative. Grace is not merely a covering, (which Brunner seems to hold) but it is the creation of new life. This salvation is not wholly of election--not wholly of God's work. But through man's actual choice is also truly his act. This conception of grace and freedom certainly has ethical values higher than the strict protestant doctrine, which is the opposite error of the rationalistic type of humanism. As Maritain points out: "As the pure protestant theology of grace is a theology of grace without freedom, so the pure theology or metaphysics of humanism concerning freedom is a theology or metaphysic of freedom without grace."<sup>3</sup> The position of

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 12.



Maritain is between these, and he desires to replace the anthropocentric concept of humanism, for which the Renaissance and Reformation were chief causes, with a theocentric or truly Christian humanism.

The atheism which forms the metaphysical foundation of communism is a result of this anthropocentric humanism. It really started, admits Maritain, in resentment against the unfaithfulness of Christians. Because of their failure to create a more Christian social order, the entire system of beliefs was also thrown over. Christianity does have a temporal world task, says Maritain.

This temporal task of the Christian world is to work here on earth for a realisation in social and temporal terms of the truths of the Gospel: for if the Gospel is primarily concerned with the things of eternal life, and infinitely transcends all sociology as it does all philosophy, nevertheless it gives us sovereign rules of conduct for our lives, and traces a very clear chart of moral behaviour, to which any Christian civilization, in so far as it is worthy of the name, should tend to conform, according to the diverse conditions of history and its socio-temporal structure.<sup>1</sup>

This idea is not far removed from Brunner's, except in the emphasis that here and elsewhere appears throughout the book, namely, that it is not the Command in the concrete situation which is of primary concern, but the looking toward a more ideal Christian civilization that is important--a civilization based upon theocentric humanism, "rooted in what is radical in man: integral humanism, the humanism of the Incarnation.

Like Brunner, and differing from Berdyaev, Maritain thinks that God is in some way responsible for evil since he is the Creator of all. He also, like Brunner, finds the source of evil in man's evil doing. Likewise, he considers that our sin which divides us from God, also, when we

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



despair, leads us to the merciful God who forgives. But he has more interest and hope in creating a Christian order than does Brunner.

Marxism has vast evil in it. Yet Maritain considers that it is the work of God--the sword of God. The task of Christians is radical reconstruction which shall preserve the values it so vividly calls to our attention, and enable them to come to a truer fruition through this integral humanism. "This transformation demands, not only the inauguration of new social structures and a new scheme of social life succeeding that of capitalism, but also (and consubstantially) a rousing of forces of faith, of intelligence and of love in the inner depths of the soul, an advance in the discovery of the world of spiritual realities."<sup>1</sup>

Maritain does not consider this Christian culture or civilization as the Kingdom of God. Like Brunner, he thinks the Kingdom of God is beyond history. But history is marching towards the Kingdom of God. The tares grow with the wheat until the last day. The idea, as in Brunner, is necessarily that of an apocalyptic eschatology.

Nevertheless Christians are to seek a world in which life can be truly and fully human and thus prepare for the coming of the Kingdom. This also is similar to Brunner's thought. And one might ask just how and why this is really a preparation for the Kingdom that is beyond history. Isn't it just as presumptuous to think man can prepare for the coming of the Kingdom as to think that it will be brought in through him?

The valuable contribution of Maritain, however, is his emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 82.



upon the place of a historical ideal, tentative and dynamic, yet an ideal to seek. This is the temporal mission of the Christian. This "concrete historical ideal of a new Christendom" is not the same as a utopia, although unlike Brunner, Maritain does not castigate the creation of utopias as being futile. A utopia represents a static ideal, but the historic ideal here suggested is also a movement. This concrete historical ideal which Maritain terms the new Christendom, "describes a certain temporal regime whose formations, in very varying degrees and in very varying ways, bear the stamp of the Christian conception of life." Maritain develops the outlines of this new Christendom "analogically" from the Christendom of the Middle Ages. By the use of "analogy" he is able to achieve freedom from the crystallized ideal of the Middle Ages.

This new Christendom will be both communal and personalistic. It can come, of course, only after the liquidation of capitalism. It will be a pluralistic commonweal. It will be ruled by Christians, whether they have professed it or not, i.e. by men who are at least loyal to Christian principles. Leadership will come from political groups of a new kind based upon freedom and many in number. These new political groups will demand moral discipline and spiritual effort on the part of the members. There will be tolerance. The unity will be not that of creed, but of the common task. It is not to be ruled by the Church. But the new Christendom will be a "vitally Christian commonweal or a Christianly constituted lay State, i.e. a State in which the secular and the temporal will play their full part and have their full dignity as an end and principal agent,--but not that of the



final end or of the highest principal agent."<sup>1</sup> Collaboration between Church and State will be by means of moral influence. As to property, the point will be to enable each human person to have property rather than allowing it to accumulate in the hands of the few. Certain collectivisations may be necessary, but more private property for all the people will be the aim. Industry, he thinks, should be a co-partnership of those on salary. The worker must know that his employment is rightly his. Corporative organization will not be from the top down, but from below upwards, and upon the principles of personal democracy. Each person can herein be most truly a person in seeking the common good, for the common good is the good of human persons.

The old order cannot be patched up. A new civilization must come. Perhaps it can come without catastrophic events which naturally culminate this era of anthropocentric humanism, but Maritain thinks that probably it cannot. But we may try. Spiritual change must go along with economic and political change. Maritain, unlike Brunner, does not reject the idea of a vitally Christian politic, but he is able to maintain its possibility only by separating personal ethics and political ethics, and calling an ethic of justice the Christian ethic. This is more in line with Vlastos and Niebuhr than with Brunner. Also like Niebuhr, Maritain thinks the proletariat has a most significant place in the creation of the new Christendom, but while Communism has been the instrument of God in making it class-conscious and aware of its dignity and humanity, there will have to be a Christian renaissance among both intellectuals and workers. Not all of them will have to

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 171.



become Christian, but they will have to recognize the principles upon which Christian leaders are laboring to reconstruct society; they will have to accept the same human ideal, and in so doing give up class hatred. Socialism will be able to achieve its ends only when man opens his heart to the source of life which is God. Workers can truly become persons only in this way--otherwise they become slaves to the production of things and to the things themselves.

As to war force, Maritain holds the traditional Catholic position that a just war is to be supported, i.e. a war of defence. He isn't as daring as Brunner, and does not suggest repudiation of war, although he sees how destructive it is becoming, and how precarious is any justification of it.

In relation to ends and means he says, "The order of the means corresponds to that of ends. It asks that an end worthy of man should be pursued with means worthy of man."<sup>1</sup> One might raise the question as to whether modern warfare is a means worthy of man. However, the use of force is justified when absolutely necessary. Necessity! This seems to be the final criteria for practically all the men we have discussed. And what a precarious criteria! Maritain himself pointed out previously the dangers of pseudo-realism, that is, machiavellianism --a pure empiricism in politics. He reminded us that the fruit of action might be very different in the long-run from the immediate results foreseen. The human mind cannot always discern in the actual situation the eventual results, and more attention must be given to duration. But necessity always runs the danger of the short view, of expediency.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 244.



It appears to me that the difficulty with all these men is that although love is relevant to the ends sought and a criteria thereof, it is not so of the means used. This is a fatal error if God is the Lord of history, if He is the determiner of success and failure.

In relation to political action, that which has immediate objectives is considered as practically useless by Maritain. The objective must be more remote, long-range, looking toward the realization of the concrete historical ideal, i.e. the new Christendom. Here again Maritain is superior to Brunner, who emphasizes discernment of God's Command in the concrete situation without sufficient emphasis upon the long-range objective, the concrete historical ideal. He calls for those who will give their hearts for this future, and are interested in the present primarily in the light of the future, although not neglecting to alleviate what present suffering they can. The ethic of the Christian is thus not legalistic. "Each (person) has his particular gifts, his own situation and significance in the context of existence."<sup>1</sup>

The next practical step, thinks Maritain, is the formation of new political fellowships of an entirely new type "whose inspiration will be intrinsically Christian," and the members of which "will be devoted to a long-distance work of transformation, which requires, together with much of the spirit of sacrifice, that difficult renovation of means which has on various occasions been referred to."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps these disciplined and spiritually devoted groups may be a strong enough minority in some states to initiate a more Christian type of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 266.



action. In other states they may be forced to give the witness of martyrdom in the face of communist or fascist totalitarianism--a witness which will some day issue in good fruit in a new order, a Christian order, a new Christendom. Thus, although we cannot build the Kingdom of God on earth, we can build a new Christendom, in which there will still be sin, to be sure, but in which the contradiction between personal morality and social life will be removed and men can live together as humans.

#### General Criticisms

Prof. William Pauck in praise of Emil Brunner's work in The Divine Imperative claims that therein Brunner has overcome the criticism that dialectic theology does not have ethical content. He points out that Brunner has successfully brought theology into relation with concrete problems.<sup>1</sup> He does admit, however, that it represents the theology of the Reformers more than the theology of Karl Barth. As we have noted, Brunner abandoned the Barthian conception of revelation in order to be able to deal with concrete problems. Pauck points out that the volume presents an ethical system built upon the basis of the classical Protestant doctrine of justification by faith--upon the significance of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, as it has been understood by the Reformers. Brunner carries the problems Luther wrestled with to our 20th century. However, while accepting Pauck's statement that Brunner offers a complete system of social ethics, we must point out that in so far as this is true he departs from a pure theology of revelation in

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<sup>1</sup> Book review of The Divine Imperative, Journal of Religion, Vol. 13, pp. 349-351.



Christ and bases his thought or system upon the idea of revelation in the "orders."

Pauck mentions the five major points which Brunner clearly shows us: First, "that Christian ethics depend not upon a principle from which the ethical laws can be derived, but upon a decision of faith which in ever new forms must be injected into actual situations." Second, that Christian love is concentrated on the neighbor simply because he is given us by God. Third, the distinction between individual and social ethics is false, because man must always live in community with his neighbor. Fourth, the social ethics of Christianity require both a conformity to the given orders and a revolutionary reaction against them. The Christian life stands between creation and redemption. Fifth, Christian ethics presupposes the Church in thought and reality--it must spring from the realization of membership in "the communion of believers."

Pauck recognized that the major criticism of Brunner's work would be centered on the concept of the ordinances, but he failed to note that if this concept was weak then the whole system would be weak, for the whole system is basically founded upon the doctrine of the orders. Pauck admits that "it seems doubtful that it (the concept of the ordinances) can be as positively applied to the realm of social problems as Brunner seems to do." It is strange, then, that Pauck did not go on to say that the whole system is on a precarious basis. He also points out the rationalism that enters into Brunner's system, noting that Brunner is able to describe the state of marriage and the existence of the state, for instance, as God-given ordinances "only with the help of a rationalism which has nothing whatever in common



with the heart of his own thinking."

This is just the point, the doctrine of the orders has nothing in common with the heart of his thinking, i.e. the revelation in Jesus Christ. Yet his whole ethical system is based upon this.

If Brunner's work represents the ethic of dialectic theology, that may account for its obscurity, contradictions, and confusions which make it most difficult to grasp with clarity and precision. His work may be criticized in much the same manner as he himself criticized the Romantic theory of community. He says of it: "It is, however, the most dangerous perversion of truth, just because it oscillates, because it never can be actually 'nailed down.' If we emphasize its Platonic aspect, then it seems opposed to naturalism; but if we accept its strong statements about the organism as the principle of community, then it turns away from Idealism." This same danger besets Brunner's ethics. When he speaks of the Command as revelation in the concrete situation, then he is supernaturalistic. But when he turns to actual problems and says the Command is discerned in the orders, then he is naturalistic. The Command one time is the incursion of the irrational, the wholly other God, and reason is nothing. Again the Command as discerned in the orders is based upon humanitarianism, reason, and necessity. First he emphasizes "legalism" as the very essence of sin; then later points out that we are commanded to obey the Lex, which is legalistic. First we are commanded to preserve the orders; then we are told that we must be revolutionary. First we are told that God will build His kingdom using men, therefore in history; then we are told the kingdom is apocalyptic and will come on "that Day." Never



does Brunner unambiguously outline the elements that enter into the command, nor does he intimate that the decision of what to do represents a creative synthesis in the spirit of love as given the believer by God. Rather, in The Divine Imperative he presents a series of theses and antitheses with very little attempt at synthesis. The contradictions are left standing.

As we have pointed out his double use of the term "Divine Command" leads to confusion, for at times it seems to mean a real unambiguous and authoritative Word of God which would give the truth which Brunner indicates the Christian possesses. But again it is really discovered by the person through reason. Such a double use of the same term causes considerable confusion. The same criticism applies of his use of the term revelation, which is supposed to be synonymous with the Command. Sometimes it refers to the event of God's coming to the individual, and sometimes it refers to that general knowledge mixed with rational speculation which comes by natural mental activity. The natural ethic seems to be given divine sanction, through faith. Brunner himself states that the natural system of callings through faith becomes God's calling.<sup>1</sup> Apparently also the natural system of ethics through faith becomes the Christian ethic. In fact Brunner admits that the Christian ethic is secular ethic with a different attitude. The Christian's act becomes God's act--not his own.<sup>2</sup> This is obviously a most dangerous position, for it gives absolute sanction to our relative acts.

The Barthian concept of revelation as event, which Brunner

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, pp. 388-9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 567.



maintains on the first hand, also is subject to some criticism. This revelation, maintains Brunner, shatters history--therefore history is meaningless. Inasmuch as he also insists that the special revelation constitutes the truth of the general revelation, then actually this general revelation is not a revelation at all, except for him who has faith, and it therefore cannot be a basis upon which it becomes possible for a man to understand or apprehend at all this incursion of the Divine in the event of the special revelation. Such a concept of revelation is at odds with common sense. As a matter of fact Christ does not shatter history including all the highest in our natural lives, but gives it meaning, fulfills it. The statement of the Madras Conference of December, 1938, more truly said, "When Christ is taken seriously by a nation or an ancient culture, he destroys no whit of good within it but lifts it rather to its own highest destiny." God's goodness is not foreign to man's highest insights of goodness. It is not other than man's highest goodness except in its fullness and perfection. Man's goodness is not as nothing--nor is it a sinful pretension; but man's goodness, however much of it he possesses, is God's goodness.

When revelation is conceived of in the Barthian sense it cannot at the same time be said to give us the doctrine of God as Creator and Redeemer, nor the idea of man as made in the image of God, nor of man as essentially evil at his core. These all come from the rationalization of experience in relation to that event and to life in its totality. As A. A. Farrer has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the data of revelation does not give us a system of ethics and a sociology, nor a doctrine of man's

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. The Christian Understanding of Man (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1938), p. 185.



substantial composition from which these could be deduced. Brunner is unwarranted in including so many doctrines in that which is given by revelation.

Another general criticism could be levelled at Brunner's whole work. Brunner admits that true community and true love do not actually exist in this sinful world--they represent ideas.<sup>1</sup> Therefore no true life of faith exists, for, says Brunner, "to live the life of faith means to be in community."<sup>2</sup> This leads us on--if followed out--to the denial that revelation is actually received, for it can be apprehended only in faith. Inasmuch as faith and obedience are bound up together, and inasmuch as men are always sinners and never obey fully, then there is never full faith, and therefore no revelation that is complete. Always that which we know of God's will is relative, partial. Therefore Brunner's attempt to build an ethic on the Divine Command which is authoritative and which gives us the truth is vain. Revelation has been and will continue to be progressive.

One might also venture to say that inasmuch as the orders, which form the basis of Brunner's actual ethical system, are not actual realities, but ideas, Brunner's system is based upon speculative idealism rather than upon revelation.

Another criticism which bears some cogency has been launched against Brunner by Oscar Hardman. He says, "If in the Christian life there are to be exalted ideals but no standards, much talk of love but no accepted codification, however simple, of the ways of love, a call for Christian action as each new situation arises but no acceptance of

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, pp. 328-30. <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 320.



the findings of many generations of Christian experience, a merely opportunist ethic as opposed to a divine absolute, what he (the earnest Catholic) is constrained to ask, is to become of European Christendom.<sup>1</sup> I think we should say that Brunner's work is not quite as void of guidance and rules as is here indicated. There are considerable standards, as we have noted, from the Bible, from the orders, etc. But the truly suggestive point here is that Brunner, even after citing the guidance of the orders, calls for freedom from them and calls men to listen for the Command of God in the concrete situation. This seems to cut him loose again from any rational criteria, and opens the way for a hopeless subjectivity and relativism. More should be made of the experience of the past generations than Brunner recognizes. In order to escape from relativism and subjectivity, Brunner could well make even more of his idea of community, by considering the possibility of community of knowledge through which ends and means and guiding principles could be established. If the absolute will of God is not binding on our life within the orders because of sin, then something like this should be necessary to enable us to escape from subjectivism. We cannot too freely say that every man must "discover for himself what God's command means for him," and insist that no man can teach another person what God demands from him.

Hardman makes another criticism which we should note. He says that if the world is so hopelessly sinful, as Brunner maintains, then what could be needed more than a Church with absolute authority? (If the guidance in the orders is so ambiguous that one Christian can be

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Hardman, Book Review of The Divine Imperative, Journal of Theological Studies, October 1937, p. 442.



in one camp and another in the opposite camp in economic struggle, then perhaps some authority is needed if we are going to get anywhere. The Anglo-Catholic idea of Church authority is useful here--an authority that is not of one man, but which is of the community and which is tested by rational means. Perhaps the individual should submit these questions of action to the community of believers as far as general outlines and procedures are concerned, of course remaining free in the concrete situation to meet its peculiar exigencies.) Hardman also points out that Brunner's fear of legalism is excessive and that his interpretation of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount as God-given paradigms of love instead of rules of action is a precarious interpretation. I think we will have to admit with Hardman that there is legalism in the Bible Law.

We have noted previously Maritain's criticism of the Protestant conception of grace as a sort of cloak or covering for sin instead of a vivifying power. This is surely justified to some degree, and is relevant to Brunner, who at times seems to give an artificial meaning to the idea of justification by faith. It is relevant also to his idea of election and of special individual providence. These doctrines rest upon a conception of God that is unworthy--as if He played favorites. Brunner's use of the idea of justification by faith as an escape from the necessity of compromise--which Archbishop Temple frankly accepts, saying that God wills the compromise--is disconcerting. Social and historical situations, as well as personal acts, which are sinful are "covered by God" in order to avoid the necessity of either renunciation of the world or compromise. Both the historical situation and the individual believers are pronounced as right or righteous by God in



order that we may act in "good conscience." Now how can God accept a man as righteous, or a situation as righteous, if it isn't? He may accept us while unrighteous, forgiving us, but that does not mean the same thing. Brunner's concept has a certain unreality and ambiguity about it. Furthermore his idea of God hallowing our secular action through faith has the same dangers of considering our insights from the orders as the Divine Command, thus absolutizing the relative. Unless our action really is sanctified and hallowed, then to consider it as such is extremely artificial and dangerous. The difficulty with Brunner is that he considers the most essential element of grace is the status of forgiveness, not vivification of life, real sanctification, strength to overcome evil, the triumph of love over sin. His overwhelming emphasis is that God gives us forgiveness. He has little to say of grace as the power of God to salvation which is positive goodness and victory. The only volume in which he emphasizes positive triumph is the little booklet The Church and the Oxford Group. Herein his emphasis is more truly Christian. He calls attention to the fact that "in the New Testament and in all true Christian life the chief accent lies, not upon the fact that we are still sinners, but on our release from the power of sin."<sup>1</sup> A little later he reminds us that "there is far more danger that men will not take the power of God seriously, than there is likelihood of the opposite error."<sup>2</sup> These are excellent statements, and one can only regret that they were not reflected more clearly in his other works to which we have referred.

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, The Church and the Oxford Group, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 60.



The criticisms of Brunner's position all are based on his conceptions of God and man, which he claims are given in the revelation. We have questioned that these are given in the revelation, and suggested that they are taken from experience and are rationalizations thereof. In fact, all that we can know of revelation is that which has been experienced. When we criticize Brunner's doctrines of God and man we are not attacking the truth of the Incarnation, but his interpretation of what it means. The absolute separation between God and man which Brunner finds in the revelation can be denied without denying the Incarnation, and in fact is, by Berdyaev, Demant, and Maritain. For them ethics is the activity of both God and man. Man can be wholly dependent upon God and yet have a real part in ethical activity. As we have suggested, Berdyaev's conception of a "theo-andric" ethic seems more acceptable. The writer also favors Berdyaev's conception of a limited, struggling God as over against the absolute sovereignty of Brunner's conception which leads him to the doctrine of election and to a more or less artificial view of sanctification, and to the idea that the sinful world as it is is God's will in spite of everything. The emphasis of Brunner upon God as Creator (in the past) and Redeemer (in the future) is inadequate, inasmuch as it gives little place to the creative process which is constant, taking place at present. Wieman has a healthy contribution to make here. And this emphasis is not limited to the naturalistic theists, for William Temple has noted this same thing, namely, that God is active in the process of history.<sup>1</sup> Man does not stand between creation and redemption in some static state.

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<sup>1</sup> Wm. Temple, Christ the Truth, (London, Macmillan, 1926), p.95.



And with a more dynamic conception of God would come a more determined effort to discern the Divine Purpose in the historical process, from which purpose much light would be thrown upon the problem of ethics. "The conceptions of God of both Luther and Calvin cannot be the conception which we, in the light of our modern knowledge, can implicitly accept, and the historical conditions of their age, so totally different from ours, must have affected their judgments," says A. E. Garvie; thus suggesting the source of weakness in Brunner's doctrine of God.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, while holding to the conception of the absolute sovereignty of God, Brunner at the same time seems to think that God is unable, in this historical epoch, to overcome evil and actually redeem society, but can only end it all in some catastrophic future event.

We have noted also the weakness in Brunner's doctrine of man in which his dignity is sacrificed to his sinfulness. Brunner seems to think that either God must be everything and man nothing, or else man must be everything and God nothing; so he chooses the former. This comes from the essential discontinuity which he maintains between God and man. It accounts for the fact that he obliterates the distinction between good and evil, and insists that although a man be very good and do many good acts, he is at heart a sinner just as are all men. There is, of course, a measure of truth in this, but Brunner's emphasis is dangerous. While he has insisted that God is what he does, he breaks away from this insight and will not admit that man

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<sup>1</sup>A. E. Garvie, "Notes on Recent Foreign Theology," Expository Times, Vol. 46, p. 79.



also is what he does. We have also noted the danger in Brunner's conception of sin, in which man is seen to be a sinner even when he has no responsibility. Also when sin is divorced from morality to such a high degree it becomes dangerous. Berdyaev's position likewise becomes dangerous in this respect. Brunner also tends to reduce the whole network of social evil to sin. He does not distinguish adequately between sin and the other roots of social evil and disintegration.

A most interesting side-light can be seen here. Inasmuch as Brunner holds that there is an Absolute Law of God in reference to the orders as created, i.e. to the orders as ideas, he is in danger of a form of idealistic legalism. The way he escapes this idealistic legalism is by a recognition of the presence of sin. For instance, God wills that no marriage should be broken up. But sin has corrupted marriage, therefore the absolute law of no divorce is not to be followed, and man is free from this idealistic legalism. This is most interesting and a bit ironical. The essence of sin, Brunner has said, is legalism. But here it appears that man is saved from an idealistic legalism only by the fact of sin. What a boon sin is to humanity! Its presence frees us from legalism which is the very essence of sin!

David Cairns has recognized the weakness of Brunner's treatment of evil and says, "Admittedly the problem of Evil is one to which no final answer can be given, but more light can surely be thrown on it than Brunner has done."<sup>1</sup>

As related to justification by faith, there is a certain artificiality about the distinction Brunner makes between sinful and good

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, God and Man, Introduction, p. 36.



action. If a man recognizes his brother's need and out of human sympathy meets it, he sins, for "all that is not of faith is sin." But another doing the same thing, not because of human sympathy, but because God is to be served in this way, and because he has faith, does not sin.<sup>1</sup> This same artificiality appears in relation to positive service, and to labour. The same acts are done in each case, the only difference being in whether they are done in faith. Apparently faith does not need to produce really new fruit, but only the same fruit miraculously regarded as new by God.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise Brunner's doctrine of vocation, while having much of value, runs this same danger. There is little distinction between vocations at all. Only a few extreme vocations are regarded as outside the grace of God--all others seem to be equally acceptable, and the person's action therein is mainly conservative, rather than redemptive. One might almost say that the whole emphasis of Brunner throughout The Divine Imperative is not that man should actually be served, his life critically evaluated and improved; but that he should be brought low before God. His major interest often seems not to be humanitarian, but theological, i.e., his ethic is used as a bulwark of his theology. Recognition of God's grace seems to be more important than realistic service to humanity. Brunner seems to be afraid that God will not receive His due honor and glory--as if that is what God wants from men. There is far too much emphasis upon the acceptance of the situation, with reliance upon the grace of God to cover its sinfulness, rather than upon positive ways of overcoming sin in fact

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<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 188. <sup>2</sup>Cf. Ibid., pp. 244, 252, and 388.



through the grace of God. This latter should be the Christian's calling. A sense of vocation may be a very dangerous thing in a man or in a nation. Surely a consideration of the redemptive possibilities of the "office" should enter into the selection of one's vocation. A doctrine of the calling which followed neither Luther nor Calvin should be developed. We should recognize that every secular vocation (with the exception of a few) is a place for the Christian to serve God, not merely by enduring in patience its evil, nor by attempting merely to be highly successful in it, but by being either creative in serving the common good, or in being redemptive in bringing to an end the evil within that particular vocation so that it shall better serve the welfare of the whole of humanity, which is God's will.

Brunner repudiates man's "false" autonomy which wants to be on an equal footing with God and to cooperate with God. This, he says, is the source of evil.<sup>1</sup> However, man's autonomy does not necessarily mean all that Brunner links with it. Nor does the idea that man can cooperate with God mean that man is on an equal footing with God. Man's autonomy does not mean that he creates the authority, the standard of value and goodness--but that he is able to recognize it and be won by it when such authority or truth or value is revealed. He does not set his arrogant will against the world, as Brunner suggests.

J. S. B. Smith upholds man's autonomy saying:

"To resolve to be guided, alike in thought and in action, by nothing but what he sees to be right is indeed the resolve to stand against all other and lesser "authorities," against all that conflicts with this. But so far is this from being man's arrogance, that it is the one true humility, the sincerity of mind

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 70.



which alone makes it possible to hear the voice of truth (of God)<sup>1</sup> and to see the way of goodness with attentive and unclouded eye.

This does not deny the transcendent, "on the contrary it is the resolve to apprehend it, to be determined by nothing less, to be determined by it wholly and alone." It is this real moral responsibility which gives man his dignity, and is the basis upon which he can respond to revelation. Compassion and forgiveness are possible for man, for there is in him still that which can evoke love and respect. Man, in himself, does have worth and dignity and autonomy, and rather than removing it, the revelation of God brings it to its highest capacity.

We have pointed out that Brunner's ethical system could well be supplemented by the emphasis of Demant and Maritain upon positive Christian programmes for social betterment. Demant's distinction between sin as the problem, and the conflict of valid desires as the source of much social evil is valuable. Wieman suggested the necessity of moral idealism; Demant pointed out the necessity of a Christian sociology, and Maritain outlined a concrete historical ideal in a new Christendom. These all point out an important aspect of the ethical problem which did not receive sufficient attention in Brunner's works.

All the men, including Brunner, hold the same position concerning the Kingdom of God, save Wieman--but even he considers that it will never come on earth. This whole problem of the Kingdom of God is extremely important, and the writer of this paper is not yet satisfied with the treatment it has received. He is restless under the dogmatic assertions that the Kingdom of God is beyond history. Yet

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<sup>1</sup>J. S. B. Smith, "The Sovereignty of God and the Dignity of Man," Hibbert Journal, Vol. 35, pp. 205ff.



he recognizes the problems facing us when we attempt to include it within history as a perfect social order. Still he is inclined to consider it an earthly category, not an otherworldly one. It appears to be both a movement within time and the goal within time toward which the movement aims. The idea that the Kingdom is beyond history, a time when the social life of man, rather than being redeemed, is ended, forces one into the apocalyptic idea of eschatology. It indicates that "faith, hope, and love" are not able to overcome the world; nor is the power of Christ sufficient to overcome evil to the extent that the Kingdoms of this world become the Kingdoms of our Lord. An apocalyptic eschatology has an element of the immoral in it, and is incompatible with a high ethical conception of God and his activity.

A. E. Garvie is the sole theologian studied who considered that the Kingdom of God was to come on earth in some sense. He states the simple fact that "God's kingdom comes with the doing of God's will on earth as it is in heaven,"<sup>1</sup> and this can happen only by God's grace--the constraint of his unfathomed love--not by "the compulsion of unmeasured power." As someone has said, "God is no celestial Hitler." There will be, thinks Garvie, "some glorious and blessed manifestation of Christ here on earth." He maintains that this is a reasonable hope. On the other hand, while there is to be a glorious and blessed consummation on earth, the final perfection is to be only in heaven. But we must maintain that God will triumph over sin in this world of men--and as always it will be in ways consistent with His being as Father of love. Of one thing we can be certain, points

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<sup>1</sup>A. E. Garvie, The Christian Faith, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 221.



out Garvie, and that is we cannot have an eschatology inconsistent with our conception of God. It seems to me that the solution of the problem of eschatology lies somewhere in this direction which Garvie is taking. Brunner himself has pointed out that "God does not preserve the world simply in order to preserve it, but in order that He may perfect it."<sup>1</sup> Now in this connection the world includes the social relationships of men, and if God wills to perfect it and those relationships, he cannot do it by shattering history, but by those means which he has used to create that which he now has brought into being. Furthermore, if we think of the coming Kingdom of God as this eternal perfection which lies beyond history, in which there are no orders, then how can we inaugurate new lines of action in this relative world in view of that coming Kingdom? Yet Brunner insists that we are to do this. No, the Kingdom must be an earthly category. Of course we cannot identify it with any contemporary program or utopia. It must be a dynamic ideal for earth, as well as the movement of God's power for righteousness which is already manifesting itself. The Kingdom of God is at hand, and it is coming--but not as the end of history, but as its actual fulfillment. That which shatters history cannot be its fulfillment, only that which actually is not discontinuous with it can be a true fulfillment. And no true social gospel is possible without a true fulfillment. There can be exhortation to do good, and attempts at amelioration, but as far as actual social salvation is concerned, there can be no good news if the Kingdom lies beyond history. Brunner's lack of a social gospel is plainly seen in this lack of a

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, Divine Imperative, p. 214.



conception of social salvation, for he maintains the orders are not to be redeemed in the end, but to be ended. Also we note his emphasis upon the preservation of the orders precedes the obligation of redemption. Our first duty, says Brunner, is not to seek the Kingdom, but our first duty is to preserve the orders.<sup>1</sup> Although he maintains that the re-ordering of these orders is important, yet when one seeks first to preserve them in this kind of a world, he will hardly have time left for redeeming them.

We are led to a consideration of the use Brunner makes of the teachings of Jesus. Here we face one of the contradictions of Brunner who repudiated the teachings of the historical Jesus as being revelation, and held that the event of the coming of the God-man was the revelation. But we find that Brunner takes the idea of the Kingdom as part of the revelation and also takes the Sermon on the Mount and regards it as an expression of Absolute Law. If the historical figure and his teachings were relative, as Brunner pointed out, then he has committed the sin of absolutizing the relative--which Niebuhr also did. The idea of the Kingdom, it seems to this writer, is a speculative one developed from the teachings of Jesus, and not one given in the event of his coming. It cannot be absolutized. Jesus himself, points out Dr. McCown, in agreement with Professor Rudolph Otto, "exhibits a strange double attitude, a living feeling for the immediate breaking in of the other-worldly future, and also a proclamation of religion and morality which reckons on an undisturbed ongoing of the world. His eschatology is not sufficiently consistent, therefore, to affect his ethic." His ethic

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 224.



is not purely interim.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be absolutized.

This indicates the invalidity of absolutizing the teachings of Jesus, and we are well warranted in criticizing Brunner's uncritical method in so doing. If he is going to use the teachings of Jesus as revelation of God's ethical will, he cannot ignore New Testament criticism and use those sayings in any way which his faith dictates. If he has not modernized Jesus, he has "theologized" him. In this Brunner does exactly the same thing as Martin Dibelius who says,

The Sermon on the Mount contains two elements; in the proclamation of the absolute will of God it announces an eschatological Kingdom of Heaven surpassing all human possibilities, in which that will shall really be done on earth as it is being done in heaven. But it demands also of the believer that he shall submit himself here and now to this unconditional will of God, although he knows that he cannot carry it out to the full. To be a Christian is to bear witness to the coming Kingdom of God during our life in this world.<sup>2</sup>

Just through what process a New Testament scholar goes in order to be able to say that the human words of the man Jesus represents the absolute will of God is more than this writer can understand. These very men have repudiated the teachings of Jesus as the basis of ethics, because he was subject to his time as is any man, and placed the basis of their ethics upon the theological doctrine of revelation. Now they turn around and absolutize those same relative teachings and call it revelation.

One more criticism may be noted. Brunner vehemently denounces mysticism and claims that the doctrine of justification by faith

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<sup>1</sup> C. C. McCown, "The Eschatology of Jesus Reconsidered," Journal of Religion, January, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrenstrom (ed.), Christian Faith and Common Life, p. 21.



strikes a fatal blow at this doctrine. It is not so much the idea of justification by faith that strikes this blow, as it is Brunner's meaning which he gives to it and to the idea of the "wholly-otherness" of God. Professor Rudolph Otto has pointed out the close relationship between the mystic experience and the experience of justification by faith. He says,

The relationship between the mystical thought of Eckhart and the doctrines of Justification and Grace can be summed up as follows: They run parallel and correspond almost point for point. Further, their terminology is interchangeable. As regards their meaning, they may be freely substituted for one another; often enough they even may become synonymous. Finally, the thought-sequence of the first is so permeated and saturated by the content of the second that it cannot even be thought of as separated from it.<sup>1</sup>

The crux of the matter is not that the doctrine of justification by faith destroys any possibility of mysticism, but that the doctrine of the Mediator and revelation as event destroys the possibility of mysticism. Brunner insists that God cannot be found in the depths of the soul. He is revealed only in Christ. But we might raise the question of the possibility that the Incarnation means that Christ as eternal spirit is the depth of the human soul. And this spirit which God breathed into man is the very essence of man himself. The voice of what Brunner considers the "other" which speaks within us is not a question of "either--or." It is not either man's best self, or the command of God who is "other." It is both. When a man is confronted by Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, there is an answer out of the depths of his own being, which is faith. This answer is in a way God answering himself, but it is at the same time man's answer to God,

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<sup>1</sup>Rudolph Otto, Mysticism East and West, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1932), p. 204.



for the essence of man is the spirit of God, not the ego.

Brunner is, of course, correct in repudiating a mysticism which withdraws from the world and thinks it can serve God in isolation. But the type of mystic contemplation and discipline of which Berdyaev speaks is surely not invalidated by Christianity.

In spite of all these criticisms, there is in Brunner's works much valid insight and penetrating criticisms of false assumptions which we too easily make. Many of these criticisms we have of Brunner may be unfair. Brunner himself would probably point out, for instance, that the criticism about the artificiality of the meaning of justification is overcome by his own insistence that faith and obedience cannot be separated. Yet the contention here is that the emphases of Brunner upon certain aspects of theology and upon statements which undoubtedly point toward an artificiality where righteousness is imputed while the person remains sinful, makes our criticism just.

We can accept the centrality of revelation, and yet disagree as to the meaning which this event carries. We must, however, insist that in the question of ethics, we can never have more than relative truth, and while agreeing that legalism is evil, we cannot too easily cast aside rules and principles and our apprehension of moral law which alone can keep us from slipping into subjectivism, and upon the basis of our knowledge of which creative judgments alone can be made. And we need to remember that Brunner does recognize the need of an understanding of the elements which enter into decisions. The summary we have made of those elements earlier in this paper appears to this writer to be essentially correct.<sup>1</sup> In its light and with the

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. above pp. 72-73.



criticisms herein noted in mind, perhaps we can formulate for ourselves a clear outline of the Christian basis of ethical knowledge. Briefly let us outline such a possible theological basis for a Christian ethic.



## CHAPTER V

### A SUGGESTED THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

With Brunner, we can certainly start our discussion by asserting that the will of God is the true Good. We may disagree that this will is unknown to men apart from the revelation in the event of the coming of God personally to us in Jesus Christ, yet agree that in Him the will of God becomes lucid and vivid.

We can admit that there is a Divine Imperative which speaks within the conscience of each man, and which may be interpreted as the voice of an "other" or may be regarded with equal validity as the voice of the "better-self." The Divine Imperative is based upon the universality of conscience which witnesses in each man that he ought to do right. The Imperative gains more content when through the acceptance of the revelation in Jesus Christ, man knows the the right thing to do is to love his neighbor. For if God comes to man in his sinful state and shares his burden, forgives him, and will to be in community with him because of His love, so ought each man, so forgiven, to love his fellow men. He ought to do the will of God. He ought to act in creative love as God acts.

Who is this God whose will we should obey? We can agree with Brunner that God is he who gives Himself to men. We can agree that God is revealed. But rather than insisting that the revelation in Jesus Christ constitutes the truth in the general revelation, we perhaps



should say that God's revelation is progressive. God reveals Himself in nature, in history, in the human conscience, in human reason, in the Holy Spirit, and supremely in Jesus Christ, where His love is incarnate.

Rather than the conception of God as Creator and Redeemer, although these terms are suggestive, perhaps we can be just as accurate in thinking of God as Creator alone, including the redemptive aspect in his creative work. The conception of God which is held by Professor E. S. Brightman, in many ways similar to that presented by Nicolas Berdyaev, seems more adequate than that of Brunner. God is struggling and suffering as he creates. It is a real struggle, and it is real suffering, such as we can understand only at the foot of the cross. We need not think that it was in the past that God created the world and that in the future he will redeem it, but rather we can see that God is creating the world and man constantly. To us, that which seems a time process, may for God be a single event. God's perfection is not static, but it is movement. Perfection is essentially active and arduous. God has not been an idler through eternity, but a laborer, mighty in travail.<sup>1</sup> Reality is a cosmic drama, as Berdyaev suggests as well as H. B. Alexander, although it is not necessarily as tragic as Berdyaev suggests. And this working of God, according to the Hebrew Christian tradition, can be conceived of as having a relation to social justice. As H. F. Rall points out, "Spirit is more than matter and good is mightier than evil and God himself is good."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. the conception of God in H. B. Alexander, *God and Man's Destiny*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).

<sup>2</sup>John C. Bennett, Book Review of H. G. Rall, *A Faith For Today*, Journal of Religion, April, 1937.



We have a faith in a living God who is at work on the side of social justice and peace. His purpose is not discontinuous with the highest purpose of man, though beyond and more than that purpose which man has yet apprehended, even in Christ.

We have faith in this God of love, for we have seen His power in the Resurrection. And we believe that in the end His creative love shall overcome the evil of the world, and the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord.

When we come to our conception of man we must think of him not only as a creature, but and a child of God, made in the image of God, no matter how dimly that image is visible. Although we recognize man is a sinner, that sin is a positive force as we see it working, yet taken all in all, it would be better if we should discard the whole doctrine of Original Sin and the Fall, for with their connotations they are misleading. Man was not created perfect by God and then fell away, and now awaits restoration. The developmental idea of the universe is more valid than the ancient mythology. The ancients mistook the birth of human consciousness and the recognition of good and evil for the origin of good and evil. Evil has always been with the world. It is the stubborn resistance of the "given" out of which God is creating his world. This evil only became sin when God created man and gave him reason and freedom and the consciousness of good and evil. Whenever man has failed to do that which he recognized as the good and allowed that which he saw was not good to prevail in his life and in the situation around him, he sinned. Every time he denied the sway of the Spirit of God, of creative goodness in his life and situation, he contributed to the reign of evil, of uncreatedness. But not only this



deliberate sin is the cause of evil in the world, but also mistakes and bad choices inevitable because of man's state of incomplete createdness has caused evils. There are thus secondary causes of evil. But this possibility of man's creating evil as well as good is a necessary part of the process through which God is creating man as human personality. God has brought life up to the status of man, of self-consciousness and self-direction. He has brought up out of the primal nothingness the universe, and in that universe he has created man who has knowledge, freedom, and reason, but who only partially has been brought to the realm of love and true community with his fellows. While in his social relations it seems that man is more evil than before, yet we must realize that man is a very recent emergent upon the face of the earth. Also individual men probably have improved in spirit and will, even though the complexity and power of their physical environment has gone far ahead of their good-will and now threatens to destroy much of their material civilization. But God has not failed. Man will yet be brought into the full stature of Jesus Christ, who reveals not only God, but also true man.

It bears emphasis here that if we are to have any hope of an improving manhood and an enriched life of fullness of creative activity, we must improve the social environment, as well as proclaim the Christ who alone can free man from enslavement to his inertia and state of uncreatedness. In order to do this we must recognize the manifold causes of social evil, not oversimplifying it as man's rebellion against God. Professor John C. Bennett has made a valuable contribution in pointing out this necessity and in listing some of the general roots



of social evil which must be cut before man can achieve true social development, and thus the richer life of salvation.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion of God and of man has been altogether too brief to avoid many problems which will always be with us, but it must serve the purpose of pointing in the direction of a more adequate theological basis for our ethical life than the Reformation gives us.

When we come to the actual problem of what to do in a given situation, the following elements must enter into our decision. First and foremost for the Christian is the Command to love our neighbor, and the power is given within our hearts to truly love him, respect him, and bear towards him the same good-will as we have for ourselves. But this good-will and desire to serve our neighbor out of the fullness of love which God has given to us must be guided by some method or discipline which will enable us to be realistic and not sentimental in our service. Although we cannot be legalistic, indeed, that we dare not be, knowing that every concrete situation is different, and that every person has a peculiar personality of his own, we do need guidance by which we can determine our action.

The general outlines of Christian action in our contemporary world should be worked out through fellowship in a group of those who are committed to doing the will of God. The first and foremost guiding principle for such a fellowship and for the individual therein is the word of Jesus, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness."

In order to do this the group should clarify and vivify the meaning of the term, The Kingdom of God, as far as it is a relevant

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, Social Salvation, Chap. I.



ideal for our earthly action. Or, if the Kingdom itself is held to be beyond history, then some tentative concrete historical ideal such as suggested by Maritain in his outline of the new Christendom should be worked out. As John Oman has pointed out, the concept of the Kingdom will determine to a large extent the moral attitude and action of the believer.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the meaning of the Kingdom of God must be clarified and a concrete historical ideal which is in keeping therewith, or which is the best approximation of it which we can visualize, must be constructed through use of social knowledge given us by the social sciences, and by the free play of creative imagination. Hereby we can have a tentative though dynamic ideal, which can give positive guidance to the individual as he faces concrete situations.

When the outlines of a concrete historical ideal, or of a new Christendom, have been formulated, the fellowship should select norms and principles by which it can further proceed to the selection of means by which the concrete historical ideal can be advanced. In this the Bible, critically understood, will of course be prominent. The perception of the ways in which God works will be the foundation of such norms. If God's way of acting is creative and redemptive, then likewise the means which Christians use should be creative and redemptive. If God relies upon persuasion and love, instead of violence, and takes the long perspective, so should the means used by Christians.

In the light of such norms, actual means which are available or which can be created in the concrete historical situation should be selected. These means will always be tentative and in a degree

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Cf. John Oman, Grace and Personality, 4th edition, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1925), Chap. VII.



experimental. Furthermore it will be necessary to bear in mind always that the means cannot be separated from the end sought, but that the means used partially determine the end finally achieved.

In constructing this concrete historical ideal and in choosing and using the means available in the particular situation, the combined resources of faith, intuition, tradition, science, reason, and creative imagination will need to be used. The individual and the group will need to know as much as possible about human psychology in order to know what tricks the human mind may play upon them, thus perverting their purposes. They need to know what forces are at play in the individual and in society. They need to test constantly their presuppositions and to keep always an attitude of open awareness to the uncomprehended possibilities of which Wieman has spoken. When one has accomplished his best and seen his highest, there remains--to the true believer--the awareness that it is short of the glory of God. Therefore the tension between what is and what ought to be will remain. No man who has been addressed by God in Jesus Christ can relax ever into complacency and think, "there, now it is done."

Ever and anew we must ask the question, "What is the will of God for me in this situation? How can His love find realistic expression through my action here and now?" Thus, as Brunner pointed out, Christian action will be always to some degree unpredictable. Yet it will reveal always also a certain consistency, the consistency of love that seeketh not her own, but that suffereth long and is kind.



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